

***Key stakeholders and their
perceptions of the current position
and viability of independent prep
schools?***

Siobhan Emma Howes

**PhD
University of York**

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Abstract

The current educational position and viability of the standalone preparatory (prep) school in England is examined through the perceptions of three sets of key stakeholders: parents, prep Heads, and senior school Heads. This type of school has been in existence for centuries and today forms a unique part of the independent education sector, but it is believed to be under threat due to declining numbers and school closures.

The research used purposive and convenience sampling to identify case studies and face-to-face interviews were conducted with the key stakeholders. The case studies were selected from the Greater London area (deemed urban) and the Rest of England (deemed rural). Parents and Heads from eight prep schools and six senior schools were interviewed.

The key stakeholders expressed their views with regard to the benefits (or otherwise) of prep schools and the pupils educated in them, the clients and the competition of such establishments. The study examines the issues currently facing the prep school as identified by the key stakeholders and considers whether these issues pose a potential threat to the sector's viability. These risks are also considered in comparison to some broader trends affecting the education market in general.

The research highlighted a large number of similarities across stakeholder views across geographical locations and noted the emergence of a new type of client. A second strand to the London market was identified which had a different purpose behind their choosing of a prep school.

While no single threat is likely to be fatal to the prep school, a number of threats have appeared which, in combination risk a long, slow demise of this type of school. Although pupil numbers have plateaued over recent years, the emergence of the new customer, together with a willingness to adapt and to address at least some of the threats being faced, could be enough to ensure the survival of prep schools. However evidence of tension between education and the market was evident and could in itself impact on such a school.

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Author's Declaration

I confirm that the work in the thesis is my own and has not been submitted for examination at this or any other institution for another award.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis investigates the views and opinions of key stake holders with regard to the current position and viability of the standalone preparatory (prep) school which educates pupils to the end of year 8 in England.

There are about 560 prep schools in the United Kingdom, educating about 130,000 pupils (Independent Association of Prep Schools, 2010). These are by no means an homogenous set of establishments; they have different age ranges, different gender balances, some are day schools, some boarding, some stand-alone prep schools (feeding pupils to a large number of senior schools), some are attached to senior schools (transferring the majority of their pupils directly into their own senior school). The variations are numerous. The type of school specifically referred to in this research however is the stand-alone prep school (i.e. it is not connected to a senior school) which takes pupils through to the age of 13 at the end of Year 8 and educates pupils from “Early Years”.

The research was prompted as a result of my experience working in various prep schools over a number of years. During this time I was party to numerous conversations with parents and staff which led me to think about the future of this type of establishment. These conversations involved two main themes:

- 1) concerns being expressed about the impact of the changes being proposed to the Charities Act 1993 by the Charities Commission which would directly affect schools.
- 2) concerns regarding the retention of girls at the end of Year 6 going into Year 7 and 8. This was considered a difficult cycle to break and had resulted from it being a relatively recent conversion from boys only to co-educational status.

Separately from this, I was aware of the closure of more and more middle schools which were institutions similar in age to the prep school. My initial thoughts led me to question whether such closures were being made due to evidence suggesting schools of this type and age range were not an effective

means of educating pupils. If this were the case, I believed there could be a negative impact on the prep school. In addition to this was consideration of the economic climate which was impacting on the prep school in a number of ways effecting both their expenditures and income. From these issues emerged a desire to investigate further what may lie ahead for the prep school and to that end this research began. Whilst these four areas were the trigger for the research, the research itself was far more wide-ranging and open ended; investigating views of key stakeholders through extended qualitative interviews.

The aim of this research was to investigate the views of key stakeholders with regard to the current position of the prep school and any issues which may currently be impacting upon it and to seek their views regarding how this may affect the viability of the prep school. In order to address these aims the central research question was framed as:

What can the perceptions of key stakeholders of independent prep schools tell us about the current position and future viability of such schools in England?

To address this main research question, it was necessary to create sub-questions to gather the information required. These sub-questions are:

In the view of the identified key stakeholders -

- What is a prep school? Are there benefits of prep schools and the education they provide?
- Who are considered to be the main competitors of the prep school?
- What can prep schools do to ensure their place in a future educational market?

Having clarified the information being required and the questions being asked in order to gather appropriate information, the interviewees needed to be identified by type. Five main groups were identified:

- Heads of prep schools
- Parents
- Heads of Senior Schools
- Chairs of Governors¹ The representative body (in the UK, the Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS))²

The reasons for their selection are given in Chapter 5 (Methodology).

Schools in the research were divided into two categories: urban schools in Greater London and rural schools in the rest of England and their results compared and contrasted. The geographical split was decided upon due to a belief that there could be different issues facing the two regions. The specific schools were chosen partly for logistical and financial reasons but care was taken to try to match schools in the two regions as closely as possible, i.e. one small, two medium and one large. From this the senior schools to which the prep schools fed were then chosen. The reasons for these divisions are explained in the Methodology chapter (Chapter 5).

The specific type of prep school under consideration in this research is arguably at greater risk of closing when times are difficult and competition high; they lack the financial protection of the larger senior school and are potentially more at risk of losing their viability in the marketplace through a lack of economies of scale and financial pressures. Statistics do not record how many of the 130,000 pupils are in these particular types of school but should prep schools be no longer viable, there would be a significant number of pupils needing to be educated somewhere else. In addition to this, the closure of this type of establishment would substantially change the educational market place, particularly in the independent sector. The result would be a predominantly two tier system. This would impact on some senior schools (those that educate

¹ &
² These key stakeholder types were initially identified as appropriate for the study but were rejected prior to analysis due to low of response rate and the anomalous nature of their answers. Further explanation can be found in in the methodology in Chapter 4.

pupils from Year 9 upwards) forcing them to follow one of the following paths.

This handful of schools could

- reduce their entry age to 11
- establish themselves as schools that go the whole way through from 4 to 18 (but within that then have their own sub schools with their choice of age ranges),
- close

or

- pupils would attend a senior school in the two-tier system for two years and then move,

Whilst speculative at this point, these are conceivable outcomes to the closure of prep schools. Any of these scenarios would result in a reduction of school choice and potentially an in impact on educational standards and improvement as competition reduces (Walberg, 2007).

In general, there is very little academic literature specifically pertaining to the prep school. What does exist tends to be from an historic perspective or from a school prospectus angle. There is however more literature on the independent sector generally which has been a main point of reference for this research. Literature also exists with regard to school choice more generally; and on middle schools (a maintained sector school educating pupils of a similar age range to prep schools). These have been referred to in order to place the prep school in context and consider whether findings from a wider range of literature are applicable and meaningful for prep schools. Whilst much of the literature has proved enlightening and supported many of my findings there have been a few areas identified, pertaining to prep school customers, that have emerged as differing from the literature. This raises the question as to whether the differences which arose are because the prep school is actually different from the more general independent school customer to which the literature refers, or is my research identifying new trends that may be emerging which apply to independent school choice more generally.

The first three chapters of this thesis address the areas of literature relevant to this study. The purpose of the literature review in this research is to set the

scene for the study, to support the research sub-questions and to identify, investigate and give context to some of the issues raised by the respondents in the research. Chapter 2 deals specifically with the first sub-question concerning the nature and benefits of the prep school and discusses the development of the prep school over centuries in the context of the development of education in England. The prep of today is then outlined. It is felt that given the unusual nature of the specific type of school being considered in this research that an understanding of its development, uniqueness and place in the current education system is of benefit to the reader.

Having established the nature of the prep school from an historic and current perspective in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 considers the market in which the prep school exists and tools which are effective in managing the prep school as a business are identified. The chapter looks at several areas, including the marketing of a service; the customers, the competitors, external influences and promotion. This establishes the theoretical perspective in relation to issues highlighted through the views and opinions of the key stakeholders. The theoretical perspective could then be used in later chapters in two ways: (1) to analyse the views of the stakeholders with regard to whether they fitted with the existing literature and (2) to address possible solutions to the issues being faced by prep schools as raised by key stakeholders.

Chapter 4 considers some of these specific issues facing prep schools which were raised by the key stakeholders; it looks at these issues from the point of view of the literature and establishes how these concerns may have arisen. In addition to this, the chapter also addresses some of the supporting literature to the study e.g. the Charities Act 2006 and the closure of the maintained sector middle schools which are areas referred to in discussions throughout the research.

Chapter 5 discusses the methodology and methods utilised in this research and discusses that the perceptions of key stakeholders were gathered and compared with each other and with the literature. Eight prep schools were selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling in each of two geographical locations; one rural England, the other urban London. These

two regions were decided upon partly through convenience as the research unfolded but also to investigate whether the same or different issues affected rural and urban areas, where the social and economic context of the client base could be expected to differ. Within these schools, headteachers were interviewed via a semi-structured interview to ascertain their views about the current position and the viability of prep schools. The opinions of and information about, parents at each of the schools were also sought, again via a semi-structured interview. Demographic information was acquired, so too was information regarding their school considerations and choice and their perceptions of the prep school. Heads of senior schools were approached to seek their views about the prep school and its future. Two types of school were identified: Independent 11+ and 13+ entry; and Independent 13+ entry. In total six senior school Heads were interviewed, three from each region. The opinions and views of the Heads of such establishments will provide a perspective on the viability of the prep school given the desires and directions the senior schools intend to move in. Chapter 5 explains how a mixed methods approach utilising multiple case studies was employed to gather the relevant information and looks at why certain stakeholders were considered not suitable for the research. It goes on to explain the sampling methods applied to the research and how the data was coded manually for the subsequent analysis.

This analysis is then discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Chapter 6 specifically takes account of the views of the parents of current prep school pupils, Chapter 7 looks at the prep school Heads' views and Chapter 8 the views of the Heads of senior schools. These three chapters explore the given views and identify areas that are supported by, or which challenge the existing literature. Chapter 9 then takes a step back from the data to look at the broader messages delivered from the key stakeholders and considers these and the impacts they might have.

Chapter 10 draws together all that has been examined through this research, summarising the outcomes and makes suggestions as to the direction for the prep school as proposed by the key stakeholders and literature.

Chapter 2

The Prep School in Context

This research is about a specific type of educational establishment within the educational market place and as such, placing the preparatory (prep) school in the context of its educational setting is an important starting point. This chapter has two purposes; one to act as a scene setting process, the second to explore the literature in relation to responses given by key stakeholders during the research. I will explore the prep school within the English education system and will look at what has emerged as the prep school of today. In so doing, it is establishing exactly what a prep is in general, what the specific prep school of this research is and how it differs from other types. The chapter will develop by looking at the literature associated with the perceived benefits identified by the key stakeholders. In turn and in conjunction with information presented in the following chapters, this will enable an answer to be formulated to the research question:

What can the perceptions of key stakeholders of independent prep schools tell us about the current position and viability of such schools in England?

The legal age at which it is possible to leave education in England now is 18, but prior to compulsory education, which was introduced in the nineteenth century, prep schools were one type of school in which parents may have opted to have their children educated. These have a long history and debate exists over which exact school was the first of its kind. However, several can be traced back hundreds of years. These early prep schools were only for boys (often only one or two), where they were pre-educated for the public schools or for military school, which took pupils from the age of 12 or 13. These public schools educated boys for specific professions e.g. church and law and the military schools educated the officers of the future to protect the Empire; a pre education was necessary in order to gain a place in such establishments and to be able to understand the teachings once there. These prep schools have developed and are still in existence today. They form part of the independent

sector which is still fee paying and operates alongside the maintained sector of state-funded schools. This chapter will first look at the development of education in England, paying particular attention to the emergence, growth and evolution of the preparatory school. Thereafter, it will examine the perceived benefits of such establishments today.

Today, prep schools come in many guises. There are at least 600 of them worldwide, with approximately 582 of them in the United Kingdom (Independent Association of Prep Schools, 2012a). According to the Independent Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS) in 2012, about 150,000 pupils are being educated in such schools. Despite the common name “prep”, these are by no means an homogenous set of establishments. Some take pupils to 11, some 12, some 13 years and a minority (although a growing number) even up to 16 years of age. Some are stand-alone prep schools, feeding pupils to a large number of senior schools; some are attached to senior schools and transfer the vast majority of their pupils directly into their own senior school, with only a few leaving to go elsewhere. The differences continue: some are boarding, some are day schools and some a combination of the two. All of these schools, if they choose to join, fall under the auspices of the IAPS, which in turn is a member of the Independent Schools Council (Freedman, 2007).

These are just one type of school within the independent sector and highlight the variety of forms of schools that exist in this sector. In fact, this is no different from the maintained sector (Good Schools Guide, 2010).

Whilst there is much written of the changes, development and issues associated with the maintained sector, the independent sector is less well documented and the prep school even less so; with Geoffrey Walford (1986, 1991) being one of the main contributors. This chapter utilises what references could be found but it is acknowledged that heavy emphasis is placed on just a few.

Development of the preparatory school

The following section considers the development of the independent preparatory school within the context of the English education system. Figure 2.1 below acts as an indicator of the structure of the English education system today.

Both maintained and independent sectors have developed rather haphazardly to form the diverse array of schools that are available today. In the 7th century churches were offering education to their choristers so that they were able to perform in the church services. This involved singing in Latin, so pupils learnt Latin in order to sing as opposed to being taught the language for its own merits. Alongside this developed the church schools, often run on a small scale by rectors, for instance, in their own homes or in the church itself. Many of these establishments originally schooled boys in the Classics for university and in turn, the church. Later many of these schools taught younger boys in preparation for public schools (Leinster-Mackay, 1984).

Whilst a single predecessor to today's prep school is difficult to identify as a combination of schools have contributed to its current nature, it is possible to explore what kinds of education have been offered over time and how the traditional independent preparatory school has evolved through a combination of situation and legislation. The reasons why these schools were established is looked at and so too is the development of what these schools offer; how conditions have changed and how the education provided has changed and developed into what we now know.

As already mentioned, the emergence of different types of schools at different times have, through amalgamation and competition³ evolved into the current system of education. Leinster-Mackay (1984), argued that in order to be considered a preparatory school four common elements needed to be present: separation, preparation, rustication and private profit. However, the change of nature in the preparatory school world over the last twenty or so

³ In order to survive some schools had to merge with others to create new establishments. Similarly, competition over the years has forced some schools to adapt in ways it may have preferred not to, such as becoming coeducational or discarding its boarding houses. (Leinster-Mackay, 1984)

years would mean that if this definition were pursued, many of today’s prep schools would not fit the criteria. Today preparatory schools certainly fulfil the “preparation” criteria through preparing children for their change of school at either 11 or 13. With a decline in boarding, the “separation” criterion is now not often served, particularly in the Greater London area, although is still maintained to a certain degree in the “Rest of England”. Again, this is true of the “rustication”⁴ criteria which may well have been the case in the past and certainly an area to be revisited as highlighted in this research, however, as the prep school currently stands, it is not always the case, with many of the schools being town or city based, particularly in the southern half of the country.

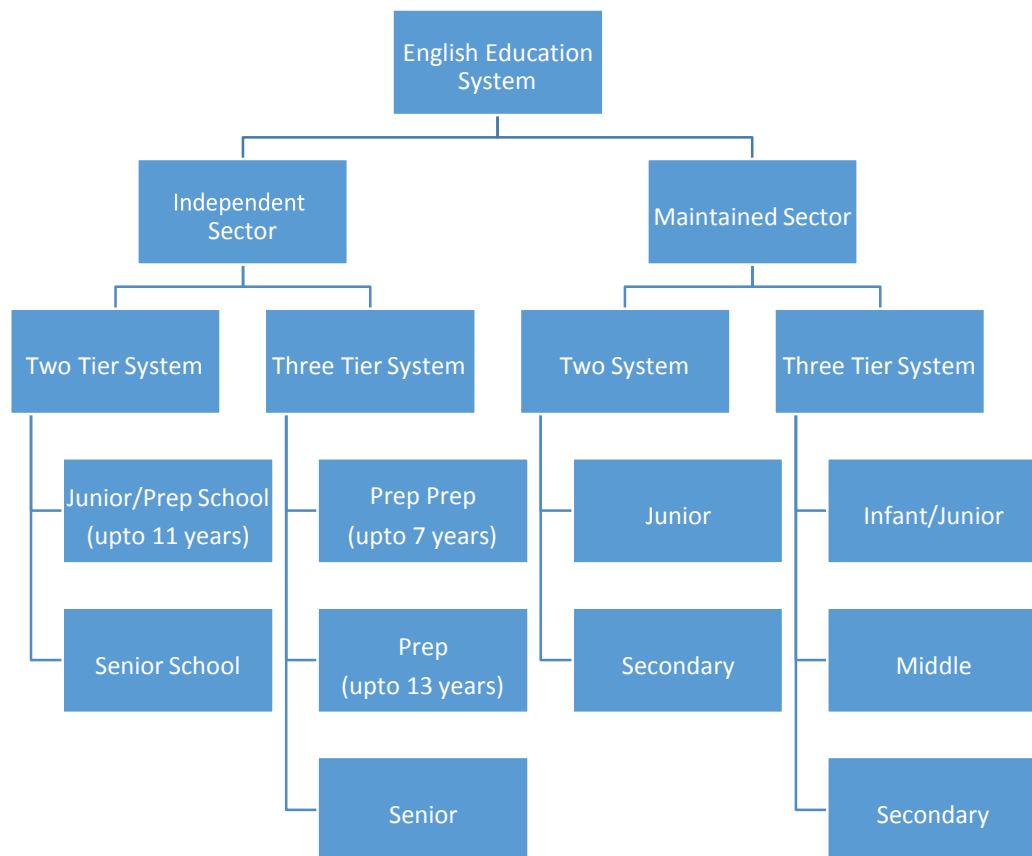


Figure 2.1 A Summary of the English Education System (simplified)

⁴Rustication - Go to, live in, or spend time in the country (Oxford Dictionaries)

As far as “private profit” is concerned, again this is not always present today. Some schools are proprietorial and as such are more than likely to be profit making. Other schools are charities and are under the umbrella of the Charities Act 2006 which will be explored in Chapter 4, these have specific rules about what “profit” actually is and what is allowed. So it can be seen that this definition of a prep school is no longer applicable.

Today’s prep schools are far more diverse, encompassing day and boarding, a variety of age groups and settings (rural and urban) which explains why so many of the early schools can claim to have influenced today’s preps. In general, the prep school of today is a school within the independent sector which educates children from seven through to thirteen. These can exist as schools on their own but can also be found as phase in a bigger school with a pre-prep and senior school, or just with a pre-prep. It is this latter type of school which is being considered in this study i.e. a school which begins and early years and educates pupils through to the end of Year 8 (thirteen years of age). Further discussion of this can be found later in this chapter under “Today’s Prep School”.

Early development

The first of the early schools were cathedral and choir schools many of which have their roots within the latter half of the first millennium with York Minster Song School, for example, having its foundations as early as 627A.D.⁵

However this type of school concentrated on the choral abilities of their pupils and it was due to the singing that they became familiar with Latin as opposed to being taught Latin for its own sake (Leinster-Mackay, 1984). The next main development was the emergence of the schools of the early seventeenth century which were set up illegally (their foundations being Roman Catholic) to educate British boys, to avoid them having to travel to

⁵ Both Minster School York and St Peter’s, York, claim this school as their heritage, although there is no conclusive evidence either way.

the continent to be educated (Leinster-Mackay, 1984). Come the French

Revolution, boys who had been sent to the continent were returning to Britain for safety but were still in need of an education. These “illegal” schools (e.g. at Twyford and Standon Lordship) took on the “refugee” boys and provided an education for them (Leinster-Mackay, 1984).

Nineteenth century

By the nineteenth century, schools which are more recognisable as the forerunner to the modern prep school began to emerge. Whereas much of Europe had compulsory education by this time, the dominant opinion of successive governments in England was that education should be voluntary and free from state intervention (Green, 1997); however by the end of the nineteenth century this view was beginning to be contested as new thinking developed that believed all children had the right to be educated to the level of basic literacy. This belief was developing to the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, with greater urban populations and a growth in the population in general, fuelled by growing birth rate and declining infant mortality (Griffin, 2010). The argument in favour of compulsory education was that the population could engage in a changing world and would enable them to read the Bible which would help to maintain a moral society (Brisard & Menter, 2006).

With the Industrial Revolution under way in England and the British Empire expanding overseas, the English population saw changes as never before. With this came an impact on education. Whilst education was being made compulsory for all, a handful of public schools were gradually expanding due to the growth of the British Empire and the need for military personnel to be overseas for long periods. This promoted the demand for schools which would not only provide an education but would also accommodate pupils residing for prolonged periods of time. Wives often accompanied their husbands on such postings, meaning that often very young children as young as eight or nine were being placed in public schools which were designed for

older boys. Educating such a diverse range of age and ability was difficult and it was at this time that schools for the younger children began to emerge (Leinster-Mackay, 1984).

At this time many of the private classical schools that had previously been preparing boys for university changed their function and started preparing younger boys for public school. At the same time Dame Schools were being established which were run by women who needed to make a living for themselves due to the number of men away at war. In many cases the Dame Schools focused on the younger age range and prepared children for the last year or so of preparatory school. Over time many of these Dame Schools fell prey to competition and neglect - however a few did survive and were eventually recognised by and accepted into the IAPS in the 1970s (Leinster-Mackay, 1984).

By 1864 there were sufficient preparatory schools to warrant a committee and a report being issued *i.e. The Clarendon Report*, which, amongst other things

- discussed the age of transfer from preparatory schools to public school;
- considered preparatory school deficiencies;
- recognised the need for the separate treatment of young boys (from the older boys)

From this, one of the recommendations was that the Lower and Upper schools (older and younger pupils) of Eton be separated and specific comment made that in doing so and in making a separate Lower School, no preference was to be given to the transfer of these boys over any other applying from any other private school (Great Britain, 2005). Then, four years later this idea was developed by the Schools Inquiry Commission, chaired by Lord Taunton, which had been set up to investigate the schools for middle-class boys. One of the Commission's recommendations was the importance of separately educating boys going on to first grade schools (Allsobrook, 1986).

At the same time as this inquiry, there was considerable unrest from feminist campaigners who wanted girls' education included in the School

Inquiry Commission's investigations. They were victorious. In the presentation of the final report, the deficiencies in girls' education were acknowledged. The next couple of decades were to see a great change in girls' education; they were to be educated intellectually and to be socially skilled in the public and domestic spheres (Purvis, 1991). By the end of the nineteenth century schools such as Brighton High, Wycombe Abbey, Roedean and Cheltenham Ladies' College were being established in order to provide girls with such an education. These were all single sex schools.

Further and more wide ranging changes to the education system within England were instigated in the nineteenth century - both within the state and the private sectors; compulsory education to 11, recognition of girls' educational rights, the realisation that age-appropriate education was necessary and an emergence of boarding. However, single sex education was still very much at the forefront in the private sector and continued to be so for many years, with odd exceptions.

Given the co-educational nature of today's prep schools, there is one particular 19th Century school worthy of mention. It is the school of Miss Eva Giplin, founded in the 1890s at Weybridge, Surrey. Miss Giplin's school was co-educational with the girls being educated to the age of thirteen and the boys to the age of eleven, at which stage they went on to other preparatory schools for their final years before (senior) public school. It is this coeducational element which is of particular interest and seems to represent many of the modern day preparatory schools rather more than the single sex establishments already mentioned. However, it is an amalgamation of many schools which have really created today's preps.

Associated with today's prep schools, are their facilities, breadth of curriculum and their nurturing ethos (Laffey, 2010; Wheare, 2010), these points were also mentioned by respondents in my research (Chapters 6 to 9). However, apparently, these were not always present. Life in many pre – Victorian preparatory schools was harsh; flogging was prevalent, food was poor, living conditions were frugal, washing facilities were limited and there was no Matron-care for the boys (Leinster-MacKay, 1984). These words were

describing a school whose more publicised description was “a first class school for the sons of Noblemen and Gentlemen” (Leinster-Mackay, 1971, p.16). Although a commonly reported situation, not all schools were like this. These conditions were, on the whole, due to two reasons: first the idea that harsh conditions strengthened character and secondly, purely for financial reasons. Many of these organisations were being run for a profit so a tight hold was being kept on the purse strings (Aldrich, 2004).

Twentieth century and beyond

Around the turn of the twentieth century, as compulsory education was being raised to 14 years of age and secondary education was being developed in the state sector, conditions in prep schools began to improve. Recognition was also given to the fact that pupils in boarding schools needed some privacy. Dormitories were changed from open plan conditions to containing smaller, individual cubicles. Where this was not possible, Master’s rooms were located close to the dormitories so that the same sort of eye could be kept on the pupils in the same way as parents would at home, where siblings shared rooms. At about the same time there was the acknowledgement of the need for physical as well as intellectual stimulation and sport became a more integrated part of the education provided. Some schools even installed their own swimming pools. This idea of a need for physical stimulation will be investigated further later in this chapter. For now, it is sufficient to say that the preparatory school as we know it today was gradually taking shape.

Up until this point, *i.e.* the turn of the twentieth century, the main belief was that the preparatory school’s role was to prepare pupils for their life at Public School and whilst this was still very much the case for many schools, there was a preoccupation with some schools of getting their boys into the navy and so there needed to be some co-operation on the age of entry to the Royal Naval College. Up until this point boys had been taken at twelve or thirteen, the College favouring the former. After discussion however, it was decided upon that boys would enter the College at thirteen therefore fitting in with the transfer of peers to public schools which had been set up at the end of the nineteenth century once it had been established that suitable provision had

been arranged for boys up to this age with the establishment of preparatory schools (Lloyd, 1966). The age range of transfer at 13 was now firmly fixed.

From the mid-nineteenth century until the onset of World War I, preparatory schools continued to grow initially in a slow number, but then with gathering speed. The increase was caused partly as more private schools turned into preparatory schools due to the increased competition in the older ranks from revived endowed grammars (Steedman, 1989), but also partly, due to the number of private individuals who felt they could make money from such ventures. There was also an element of supply meeting demand as public schools set up their own preparatory schools. This caused some of the other Public schools difficulty attracting pupils at the age of thirteen as parents saw the benefits of choosing the type of school where their children would automatically transfer to the senior school and would not need to worry about having to find a new school at thirteen. There was no examination pressure as to whether their child would get in and the pupils became familiar with the traditions at an early age and easily took them on board⁶. It was also believed that by being near but not with older children, the boys learnt their own place in the pecking order⁷ (Leinster-Mackay, 1984).

In response to the number of preparatory schools which had been established, the Association of Headmasters of Preparatory Schools (AHPS) was founded in 1892. Later this organisation became the Independent Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS) which still exists today but has since merged with the Association of Headmistresses (AHMPS) in 1981.

During this time the provision of secondary education was developing and, by 1904, a four-year secondary programme leading to certification had been established. Whilst this was primarily only of benefit to the middle and upper classes, some students from poor backgrounds did benefit (Brisard & Menter, 2014). The twentieth century, encompassing two World Wars, saw the emergence of social democracy with vast changes to the press, broadcasting, public information and

⁶ This is also a modern day concern and was raised by the stakeholders in this research.

⁷ The concept of pupils learning their place in the pecking order is perhaps outdated but there is still much evidence to support the benefits of separating younger pupils from older pupils (Blyth, 1980; Cannon, 2005; Stewart, 1978; Yeomans & Arnold 2013) and from respondents in this research.

ultimately technology. From the outset of the twentieth century there was acknowledgement of the need to educate the population with compulsory education to 14 (Bartlett & Burton, 2012). In addition to this, the psychology of treating each child as an individual and addressing their individual needs was emerging, in particular in relation to younger children and this was addressed in the Hadow Reports of 1926, 1931 and 1933 (Brisard et al, 2014).

During the years of the Second World War, it was a strategy of the British government to plan for post war life in order to keep up morale. It was on this basis that the Fleming Committee was formed to investigate public schools and the general educational system. The Fleming Report was produced in 1944 along with the 1944 Education Act. Preparatory schools *per se* were not included in the remit but there were some implications for them. The main repercussion for preparatory schools was that boys and girls from elementary schools who were capable of benefiting from a public school education should be able to do so irrespective of parental income. The difficulty here was that the elementary schools at this point finished at the age of eleven which meant that there were two years before pupils were able to join a public school. State secondary education would not be suitable for these two years so the only option left was that these pupils should join a private preparatory schools or a junior school of a public school (Walford, 1991). This could be seen as disruptive for not only the individual pupil but for the classes they were joining too, for such a short amount of time.

Post World War II Britain saw a boom in admissions to preparatory schools. Following the depression of the thirties and forties, the end of the war signalled new hope for many and they wanted to embrace it. There was also a change introduced by the 1944 Education Act which abolished secondary school fees and stopped parents paying for their children to go to grammar schools. Some of these parents therefore sought preparatory schooling for their children. Although well received, this increase in numbers caused its own headaches for preparatory schools. Many needed to start building work in order to house these new admissions. There was also the problem of staffing – both teaching and domestic. Not only was an increase in pre-war staff numbers required, there was also a need to retrieve existing staff who had joined the armed forces and were

still away. The shortfall was rectified by employing men who had been invalided out of the Forces, and via a demand put into the Ministry of Education for the return of other staff from the armed forces. On the domestic front, many staff previously employed by schools had migrated to factory jobs which were better paid. The shortfall in this area was made up by au pairs who had come from Europe to improve their English language skills (Leinster- Mackay, 1984).

This increase in numbers was not short lived and placed increasing pressure on preparatory schools. The 11+ examination to enter Grammar schools became increasingly difficult and competitive and many Local Education Authorities (LEAs) failed to provide enough grammar school places so parents sought alternatives (Bartlett et al, 2012). Preparatory schools continued to grow. The situation in the state sector was hampered even further by the ‘baby boom’ birth bulge of the fifties and early sixties which meant even greater numbers of pupils fighting for limited grammar school places. This had a knock-on effect for preparatory schools. They were receiving increasing numbers of children at eleven, or even younger if parents had foreseen the potential problems, but they were also being affected by the birth bulge (Walford, 1991). Places in public schools were reasonably inelastic and so led to fierce competition for the places with extra coaching and severe pressure being placed on pupils and families. Major criticisms of this were forthcoming. Comments which suggested that prep schools should be offered help to place their weaker candidates in non-Headmaster Conference (HMC) schools were not well received by the maintained sector (Brisard et al, 2014). Suggestions that more public schools should open were better received but they were not an immediate solution.

At about the same time the Common Entrance examination⁸ itself came under fire from several quarters. The criticisms which arose were that mark schemes should be issued to allow consistent marking and suggestions that it should be abolished entirely in favour of a Junior Certificate of Education, administered by the preparatory schools themselves were also voiced. Appeasement was offered in the form that there would be a restriction to the number of examinable subjects at Common Entrance (CE) level and a greater emphasis put on a personal profile questionnaire which would be extended to include a greater emphasis to be placed on the arts. There was even a suggestion put forward which suggested boys should be able to qualify for places at public schools when they were ready, even if this be

as early as at the age of eleven. To try to address such concerns, and at a time when another birth bulge was detected, the IAPS published a document whose remit was to investigate the possibilities of boys entering or leaving preparatory schools as a result of the eleven plus examination. The whole idea was to allow for easier transition for pupils between the maintained and private sectors in line with the wishes of parents. At this time any transfer between the systems was very difficult due to the hugely different emphasis of syllabus (Leinster-Mackay, 1984).

“Foundations” as this forty seven page document was called, made several recommendations advocating a mixture of modern and traditional ideas. Seven of the recommendations were considered major. These were, as listed by Leinster-MacKay, (1984):

- to start Latin at a later age (ten or eleven)
- to only teach Latin who would be able to benefit from it academically
- to introduce some sort of science to place a greater emphasis on greater literacy in English
- to place more emphasis on cultural issues such as music
- to increase the amount of geography and physical education;
- to take account of boys’ differing educational needs through greater flexibility

In spite of the initial excitement over the publication of this document, there were still comments which cautioned that the Common Entrance (CE) and scholarship examinations still had to be the ultimate arbiter of what was taught and how. At this point, further discussion about the nature of the CE examination ensued and proposals made that it should be limited to three compulsory subjects; English, Mathematics and Latin, with other subjects should be offered as

⁸This is the examination which prep school pupils sit at the age of thirteen to determine into which senior school they will be accepted. This is an examination that was established in 1903 and run by the Independent Schools Examination Board (ISEB). The examination is centrally set but is marked by individual schools. Although today’s issues are different there are still concerns about these examinations which were raised by respondents within this research (Independent Schools Examination Board, 2012).

optional (Leinster-MacKay, 1984). “Foundations” and its contents was short lived however due to its emphasis on the eleven-plus transition.

Major changes were occurring in the maintained sector with the introduction of comprehensive education and the demise of Grammar Schools and, as a result, the rise of middle schools, which meant that the age of thirteen was going to be a neat transfer across both systems and the concerns of “Foundations”, being focused on the transfer at eleven, were now of less importance. “Foundations” was superseded by “Prospects” which, while similar, tried to work its recommendations into the existing examination system in place in the private sector (although recommending that another committee look at this as a separate issue) (Leinster-MacKay, 1984). Some of its recommendations included:

- replacing Latin with English as the core subject for the less able boys;
- devoting two or three lessons a week to science in the final three years of preparatory schooling;
- closer liaisons with primary schools especially in relation to the application of new techniques in mathematics and French;
- increasing opportunities for “out of school” activities.

However, Prospects did make clear that although closer working relationships were to be sought with the maintained sector, preparatory schools were to retain independence and the right to pursue religious principles and make their own educational experiments.

Whilst this educational debate was going on there was also a further change for preparatory schools in the form of their status - a change from proprietary to charitable trust status. This change was designed, partly to help the liaison between the maintained and private sector and partly to enable the most able pupils in the maintained sector, whose parents could not afford to pay for preparatory schooling, to be educated in such an establishment (therefore, acknowledging one of the recommendations of the 1944 Fleming Report). Whilst taken up by many schools, it was not taken up by all and was by no means compulsory.

As the twentieth century progressed and the twenty first century arrived, a plethora of changes and legislation ensued, one or two of which have specific relevance to this research. One of these changes was brought about through the Education Act of 1964 and saw the emergence of the middle school. This is discussed in Chapter 4 as it was an institution of similar age ranges to the prep school. The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced the National Curriculum (NC) which was met with mixed reviews. In addition to this, 1988 saw the first year of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations. Since 1988, concern has been expressed about these examinations and their year-on-year rise in the percentage of A/A* grades being awarded. Whilst these examinations in themselves are not relevant to the prep school age range *per se*, the different success rates of the independent sector compared with the maintained sector (Walford, 1991) had been realised by parents. This area will be developed further in Chapter 3 with regard to the product offered by the prep school.

More age specific to prep schools was the introduction of National Curriculum Tests, commonly known as SATs. These were introduced for seven year-olds in 1991, and extended to 11 and 14 year olds in 1995 and 1998 respectively. However these were compulsory only in the maintained sector, although a few prep schools did take them on. One of the key issues that arose from this was the view of over-testing and creating stress for young children. With the negative views of the new examinations, amongst other things, numbers in the independent sector were rising (Woodhead, 1995). During this time the 1992 White Paper, “Choice and Diversity” acknowledged a need to improve the educational provision in England and Wales, this eventually resulted in the appearance of schools with specialisms such as Sports and Art, Languages, Maths and Computing etc. The 1993 Education Act then introduced Grant Maintained (GM) schools and by 2002, the Education Act of that year made provision for Academies, later followed by Free Schools in 2010 (Hatcher, 2011).

Although forerunners to the prep school existed, and the education of small numbers of children by individuals in a home environment was well and truly established, the preparatory school appears to have developed out of a need to provide a safe educational environment for young boys whilst parents were overseas at the turn of the nineteenth century and beyond. There has been significant change

in these institutions. The boarding element still exists although there are far more day schools now as parents question the value of sending their children off to board. The curriculum has changed from its core subject being Latin to English. Greek is seldom taught. There is a balance of languages, sciences and the arts and an extremely strong emphasis on sport of all kinds. Many preparatory schools are fortunate enough to have (or have access to) a huge range of sporting activities and facilities. Conditions in these schools are no longer austere and puritanical, despite what some pupils might think today! Standards within the schools are considered high and their academic results often matching Government targets if not exceeding them.

For some years over 90% of all children in IAPS schools taking Key Stage (KS) 2 tests have achieved Level 4 and above and almost 50% achieve Level 5 and above. (Independent Association of Prep Schools, 2009)

Despite the fact that the specific origins of preparatory schools are not entirely certain, it is clear how they have mutated over time as changing circumstances and legislation combined to create what is now generally recognised as the independent preparatory school of today. It can be seen how the hotchpotch two/three tier system has developed leaving the versions that are present. This diversity now becomes even wider at the time of writing, with the “Sixteen Group” schools emerging which are still classed as “prep schools” and are part of the IAPS (Independent Association of Prep Schools, 2014a). They have been created as a result of prep schools which were educating pupils to the end of Year 8, then expanding to take pupils to the end of Year 11.

This section has looked at the development of education in England with particular reference to independent prep schools. It has looked at the forerunners of this type of school and how they have adapted in line with changing governments, legislation and public demand. The next section looks at today’s prep schools and focuses on a few identified areas where their offerings are different from many other schools.

Today’s prep school

We have looked at the development of the prep school over decades and discussed how the current prep is an amalgamation of several different schools. It has already been noted that a description put forward by Leinster-Mackay as recently as 1984 is no longer appropriate for what is today's prep. It is the purpose of this section to discuss what exactly today prep school is and to look at literature which relates to views expressed by key stake holders in this research.

Within a system of diverse educational establishments, prep schools themselves are assorted too. Despite using "prep" in their name, these schools can differ enormously. They can be rural or urban, day, boarding or a combination of the two. They can be single sex or coeducational, large (500 to 600 pupils) or small (less than 100 pupils). They can be attached to a senior school or be a stand-alone establishment. They can also differ in their age

ranges. Some prep schools only take pupils to the end of Year 6 (11 years of age), some go to Year 8 (13 years of age) and a new emerging type of prep school take pupils to the end of Year 11 (16 years of age). This later type of school is a small group of about 14 schools which have formed as the result of prep schools which educated pupils to the end of Year 8 extending their age range to 16 years. These are known as the "Group Sixteen" schools. If they so choose, all of these schools are eligible to become members of the Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS) which is a schools association and has approximately 650 schools registered worldwide (Independent Association of Prep Schools, 2015).

Despite such diversity in nature, a look at a selection of prep school prospectuses and websites shows how similar they are in what they claim to deliver. The similarity is even greater when one makes comparisons only between the prep schools that take to the end of Year 8. This age range is of particular relevance as it is this particular type of prep which is being considered within this research. Whilst each of the schools have an individual take, they all promote their academic offerings and purport to offer the same intentions and desires; their holistic, diverse education, their nurturing and caring nature. They may or may not have a particular expertise in one particular area (e.g. drama, sport etc) but their overall claim is that of providing opportunities and allowing each child to find themselves and to become strong, well rounded, balanced adults of the future. The following quotations from randomly chosen prep schools highlight the similarities in the ethos of the modern

prep school.

A London Prep School advertises:

Our aim is to ensure that the pupils at XXXXXX are challenged, encouraged and stimulated in pursuit of their true potential. To that end, XXXXXX offers a broad and balanced curriculum in which success in all aspects of the School's life is encouraged and celebrated. Our pupils are very busy young boys and girls throughout the school day and as part of the extra-curricular programme.

A West Country Prep school advertises:

XXXXXX aims to provide a friendly, purposeful, stimulating, educational environment in which all members of the school are actively encouraged to achieve their true potential.

We are proud of our reputation for being a caring school. Our aim is to prepare boys and girls for a rapidly changing world and the many challenges that lie ahead. We believe that by offering children a wide range of opportunities we can allow them to enjoy success, instilling in them a strong sense of purpose and self-confidence.

A North East Prep school advertises:

In particular we aim to develop a strong sense of family and Christian community; to pursue excellence in all areas of school life; and to ensure the development of the whole person.

Lively community of young boys and girls noted for their friendliness, concern for each other and high standards of behaviour. Our aim is to ensure that the children committed to our care are able to develop their own personalities and grow in self-confidence and self-esteem in a safe and happy environment.

...philosophy that each pupil in our care is an individual; we aim to ensure that all the children fulfil their potential and grow in confidence and self-esteem as they move up the school.

These similarities are supported and summarized by Andy Falconer, Master of St Olave's School, York, who wrote in the IAPS magazine *Attain*, (Summer 2010):

What IAPS schools provide is opportunity. Although noted for tradition of scholarship, independent schools are not the preserve of the brightest or the most gifted children. Across the sector as a whole, our schools educate children of all abilities to make the most of their talents. All of our schools, including the less academic, nonselective schools, attain impressive results and provide enormous value-added to their pupils. While the independent sector is widely respected for its examination success, its commitment to breadth is its hallmark. Our schools stimulate curiosity, experimentation and

a healthy approach to risk, while promoting general skills such as teamwork, self-sufficiency, lateral thinking and intellectual rigor. A broad curriculum together with a multitude of opportunities for personal development through extracurricular activities and leadership roles are vital elements in producing well-rounded, mature adults, able to cope with society's pressures and contribute to the common good (Falconer, 2010).

As has been mentioned, it is one particular type of prep school which is of interest to this research. The prep school of importance here is the type that takes pupils to the end of Year 8 and which is stand-alone i.e. not attached to a senior school or Trust etc. With this in mind, it is worth exploring this type of prep school as it exists today. Pupils enter this type of school typically at either four years of age or seven (less so at 11), although if spaces are available they could theoretically enter at any age. Some of the schools are selective and therefore require pupils to pass certain criteria in order to gain admission; others are non-selective and are therefore open for any pupil to apply regardless of ability. Being independent, these schools are not obliged to follow the National Curriculum; however, they do follow a different standard curriculum. This is set out by the Independent Schools Examinations Board (ISEB) and designed to enable pupils to sit the Common Entrance (CE) Examination (or similar school based examination) in Year 8. This examination system and specifically the academic content was an issue raised by several of the respondents to this study and will be discussed in more details in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

When considering the nature of the modern prep school which specifically goes to the end of Year 8, there are key aspects to consider which contribute to their uniqueness. Due to the presence of Year 7 and 8 and the nature of the curriculum to be followed, subject specialist staff are employed. In many cases pupils in younger years also benefit from being taught by these staff, something unlikely to be the case in a two-tier system where children up to Year 6 are normally taught by class teachers with a breadth as opposed to a depth of subject knowledge. In addition to benefiting from specialist staff, pupils in prep schools typically also have access to high-quality facilities too, as these are often necessary to deliver the demands of the CE syllabi. Once again children in Year 6 and below get the opportunity to use these which would not be the case again in a junior school or establishments such as the 16+ Group or "one stop shops", priority will need to be given to Years 7 to 11 (or 13), therefore freeing up very little timetable space, if any, for younger year groups.

It can therefore be seen that it is the children in the younger year groups who stand to benefit here. This was something identified by several of the respondents to this research who commented on the facilities and opportunities available to prep school pupils as benefits of such establishments. Year 7 and 8 gain benefits in different way and these too were highlighted by respondents. In the two-tier system, pupils in these two year groups would be at the beginning of their school whereas the three-tier system places them at the top of their school therefore offering them opportunities they would be unlikely to gain elsewhere due to the competition from older pupils - for example take bigger roles in school plays or take on leadership positions within school. All of these benefits are available due to the unique set up that is the “prep school”. These benefits are all discussed in further detail in Chapters 6 to 9.

As mentioned above, prep school pupils follow a course of study leading to Common Entrance examinations during Year 8. These examinations are written by examiners appointed by the Board (representatives from ISEB, The Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference and The Girls’ Schools Association). They are marked by the school being sat for. In 1990 the Common Entrance syllabus was brought in line with the National Curriculum, (although it is not the same). The core subjects examined are English, Mathematics and Science. Optional papers are available in Classical Greek, French, Geography, German, History, Latin, Religious Studies and Spanish. Some senior schools insist that some of the optional papers are actually compulsory for pupils wishing to apply for their school (Independent Schools Examination Board, 2014). Different levels of paper exist in some of these subjects and most are also available at scholarship level for the most able of pupils. Some senior schools have chosen to opt out of the Common Entrance and instead set their own papers; while these loosely follow the Common Entrance syllabus they do have their own specific syllabus⁹. This is particularly true of Greater London senior schools and was certainly raised as cause for concern by the key stakeholders in this research when threats to prep schools were being discussed. Further details can be found in Chapters 6 to 9.

⁹Whilst the Common Entrance examination is sat in May/June, schools with their own exams are at liberty to set them when they like; at present this can be as early as January of a pupil’s Year 8.

More recently, some of these London senior schools have introduced “pre testing” which can conceivably take place years before a pupil is due to join a senior school and enables schools to identify pupils they may want to offer places to. Whilst it does not give them automatic entry at the appropriate age, it offers reassurance to parents in what is a very competitive market. It also allows these senior schools to make claims on pupils they consider would be beneficial to their school.

When considering the subjects offered by prep schools, there is much similarity with curriculum in other secondary schools, whether Independent or Maintained. However, the level at which these subjects are delivered is open to argument: whilst the ISEB claim they are in line with the National Curriculum, a look at the syllabi show that some of the subjects demand far greater knowledge and application from pupils than the equivalent year group of the National Curriculum, particular where the higher levels, or Scholarship levels are concerned. In addition to this there are three further notable differences with regard to the offerings of prep schools when compared with other schools, these are their delivery of the Classics (usually Latin), the quantity of sport included in their timetable and the size of classes. Once again these were all areas identified as benefits by the stakeholders approached in this study. Each of these three areas is considered below. It is worth noting that whilst it is of interest to acknowledge the pros and cons for each of these three areas, the reality is that so long as parents’ perceive them to be of benefit, the rights and wrongs of such belief are irrelevant. This concept of perception and beliefs is explored further in the next chapter.

Classics

There are arguments scattered through literature both for and against the teaching of Classics. Arguments in its favour include the ability to be able to understand original communication and explore original works in their own words without a reliance on translation which often lose the spirit (Distler, 2000), Grueber-Miller (2006) adds to this as an advantage, the understanding

of different cultures, heritages and civilisations and the ability to problem solve. Additional arguments in the favour of learning Latin are that it offers grammatical help when learning other languages, it gives an understanding of many of the everyday abbreviations in existence in the English language (a.m. ~ ante meridian), it is also the language and culture of science, botany, astronomy, architecture, political theory and the western legal system. Thereby having knowledge of Latin will give pupils an advantage in many other subject areas too (Betts, 2010).

On the other hand, many argue that Latin is a dead language and has no place in modern society and education (Young, 2011). Thorndike tested this theory with two groups of German students, one who studied French, the other Latin. Both groups were given a course in Spanish as a second foreign language. The results showed that significantly fewer grammatical errors were made by the German students who had studied French. Haag and Stern (2003), suggested that no advantages were gained through studying Latin, their reasoning being that having tested two groups of comparable students, one learning Latin, the other not, there were no difference in their science and mathematics achievement. Whilst the case studies mentioned here add strength to the argument against learning Latin, these were both limited studies with little account taken of other elements which may have had an impact on the studies. Sherwin adds his opinion that in order to learn a language one is better placed to concentrate on the desired language and not waste their time with Latin (Clark, 2011). As discussed in Chapter 3 and 9, whilst the consumer perceives a value to something they are purchasing, then it is beneficial to the supplier to offer it.

Sport

Another aspect held in high regard by both parents and prep school heads in this research was the sporting opportunities available to pupils in prep schools. Hanson, (2012) states that “Sport is one of the defining characteristics of independent prep school education” (p. 113). With 28% of girls and 31% of boys being overweight or obese according to Government statistics (The NHS Information Centre, 2012), exercise and a change in diet are well documented ways in which to address these issues. In addition to this, recent research has

suggested a clear link between a healthy body and a healthy mind (Hanson, 2012). Riddoch (1998) and Cavill, Biddle and Sallis (2001) debate this, stating that there is little evidence to connect fitness and health in children. These claims come despite numerous writings to the contrary (e.g. Armstrong, Balding, Gentle & Kirby, 1994; Bass, 2000; Tolfey, Jones & Campbell, 2000). Roger Uttley goes further when describing the psychological benefits of sport participation, arguing the beneficial lessons to be learnt of sportsmanship, camaraderie, leadership and learning to lose, not to mention the cross curricula links of personal hygiene, nutrition and self-awareness (Uttley, 2012). Another criticism which is thrown at school sport and was particularly prevalent about 10 years ago, is the idea of competition. It is argued that sport is too competitive and that children should not be exposed to competition for fear of being upset, hurt and feeling a failure. It is the argument of many prep schools that these are vital skills which should be learnt at an early age so as to be able to handle such things in the future (Independent Association of Prep Schools, 2012b).

Perhaps related to this is the much larger number of male teachers attracted to teaching in prep schools than junior schools. This could be due to the opportunity to teach a subject specialism, get involved in sport and teach children to the age of 13 being of greater appeal to males than the classroom teacher model of the junior school. This offers a further difference (a greater number of male role models) for pupils up to eleven years of age who are being educated in the prep school as opposed to a junior school, although does not really hold up for the Years 7 and 8 as they would be exposed to a number of male staff in senior schools wherever they were educated. This is not however supported by literature as having any particular benefit as there has been no significance attached to the success rates of either boys or girls being taught by males or females (Ehrenberg, Goldhaber & Brewer, 1995; Skelton, Carrington, Francis, Hutchings, Read & Hall, 2009).

Class size

Another of the “extras” offered by prep schools when compared with the maintained sector and again amongst the things valued by the parents in this research is the smaller class size. It is acknowledged that the Independent

sector, whether two or three tier tend to have smaller class sizes irrespective of their exact nature. Independent schools have for years promoted themselves on the fact that they have smaller class sizes and that this is beneficial. Whilst not all research supports this, the general consensus is that small classes are of benefit, (as long as teaching methods are adjusted accordingly) and not always only for the reasons which may be expected. Smaller class sizes lend themselves to greater teacher involvement per pupil with pupils being off task for less time (Blatchford, 2003), and teachers knowing their pupils better both academically and personally (however this is balanced by children's relationships with their peers being worse if in a class of less than 20 pupils (Blatchford, 2003) something refuted by a key piece of research by Finn and Achilles (1999) reported by Word (1990) known as Project STAR (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio). This large piece of prolonged research suggested that long lasting benefits were gained by students whilst in classes of between 13 and 17 pupils and that whilst small class sizes were of benefit at school entry age, there were no such benefits if classes were suddenly small later in a child's academic schooling. However, for the best outcomes, class sizes needed to be consistently small throughout (Blatchford, 2003). Merrow (cited in Todd, 2008) found, in a study of urban high schools in Massachusetts, that small was better in relation to class size, although it is not clear what controls were used and exactly how this conclusion was formed. It is also worth bearing in mind that average class sizes in countries such as Japan and South Korea are often in the mid-thirties according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These are countries renowned for their academic success but this in itself cannot be taken as an argument against small class sizes, it needs to be considered that perhaps there are other elements lead to their success and that smaller class sizes could add to this success further. Unless controlled research is carried out, this is impossible to predict. The aforementioned additional benefits to class small class sizes have been better pupil/teacher interaction, easier classroom control and management, better communication skills with peers and adults, more positive staff attitudes. (Blatchford, Hallam, Ireson & Kutrick, 2010). However, it must be remembered that in essence it does not matter whether or not there is any truth in the concept that small class sizes are better, it is the perception of the client that matters.

Future prospects

A further benefit of prep schools prized by the parents in this survey was the opportunity for the future being offered to their children in terms of careers and through social networking. Whilst this is not exclusive to prep schools, but applies to the independent sector in general, the statistics tend to support such advantages with figures such as those in Table 2.1 which show the percentage of Independent school educated pupils in given careers. The success of such pupils is clear when it is considered that only about 7 percent of the population is Independent school educated. It is worth noting that this is not always seen as a good thing by all and is often a source of criticism of the independent sector.

Profession	Independent School Educated (%)
Armed Forces Officers (Senior)	62
BBC Executives	26
Cabinet	36
Cricket (England Team)	33
Diplomats (Senior)	53
Lords	50
MPs	33
Newspaper Columnists	43
Public Body Chairs	45
The Sunday Times Rich List	44
Rugby Union - English, Scottish and Welsh Teams	35
Senior Judges	71
Top 100 Media Professionals	54
TV, Film and Music	44
University Vice-Chancellors	20

Table 2.1 Percentage of Independent School Pupils in Given Careers (Milburn, 2014)

Summary

This chapter has investigated independent education to age thirteen in England. It has traced the history of prep schools from the days of the early choral schools attached to the Church to the present. Particular attention has been paid to the emergence of the independent prep school, however this has not been addressed in isolation but placed in the context of other educational developments over the years. It has been shown that no single establishment can be identified as the original prep school but that today's prep school is the result of decades of diverse elements being woven together. The modern prep school has been described and the diversity of their nature acknowledged. Many prep schools claim to offer educations which are similar to each other and some of these characteristics are unique to the prep school given their specific age range. However there are also aspects offered by the prep school which could possibly be found in other independent schools too. Specific aspects which were identified by the respondents to this study were looked at from the point of view of the literature to see whether their perceptions of the benefits actually had the backing of academic research. These areas included the teaching of classics, the amount of sport pursued and the size of classes and opportunities for careers. The arguments for and against the benefits of these areas have been given.

The next chapter looks at the prep school from a business angle; considering it as a 'product' and how it is considered from the purchaser's perspective. The market forces acting on it are discussed including competition, financial implications and developmental issues. The concept of parental perception is addressed; it is almost irrelevant as to the actual evidence either supporting or refuting a fact. If a client has the perception that something is the case, then that belief is what needs feeding from a marketing perspective.

Chapter 3

Marketing and the Preparatory School

The previous chapter has explained the concept of the prep school; how it has developed, what it is today and findings from previous research concerning the validity of what are considered, by key stakeholders in this study, to be its benefits. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the wider market in which the prep school operates. Although many prep schools are actually registered as charities, they may also be considered to have many features of a business; the business being education. Although it has a few tax concessions given its charitable status, it still needs to produce enough money to cover costs and be able develop the business. It does not work in isolation; it has a number of influences and forces working upon it. This chapter looks at such forces and looks at the prep school in the terms of a business. This enables a greater understanding of where it is currently.

Key stakeholders, interviewed in this study suggested several areas which they believed to be possible threats to the current day prep school: competition, economy, school management etc. By understanding the current positioning of the prep school, considering it from a business perspective and investigating the ‘product’ being sold, it then becomes possible to look at some of these identified threats in terms of supporting literature and then examine suggested ways to deal with and/or prevent them.

Choice has existed for many years in the education market, but now it has become far more widespread (Berends, Cannata & Goldring, 2011). As such, all schools now need to become more aware and “business savvy”. Although the maintained sector schools may gain financing through other means, they nevertheless need to look at ways to attract pupils so that they remain viable and attractive to future clients. This has long been the case for the independent sector which must maintain or increase pupil numbers to survive. As such, schools may be compelled to become more ‘business aware’ and look for methods to help in this changing environment. One such area is that of marketing. Marketing has become a commonplace tool used to develop business

growth and market share and at the extreme, support survival. The term “marketing” is often confused with “advertising”; however it is a much broader area than this. This thesis looks at the current position of the independent prep school and its possible future in the eyes of current key stakeholders; later chapters compare and contrast the views of such stakeholders whereas this chapter looks at the prep school’s position from a theoretical perspective in relation to marketing concepts. This provides a means of interpreting and location the views of key stakeholders in Chapters 6 to 9.

Whilst borrowing ideas from different disciplines is a recognised phenomenon, care needs to be taken that this is not done blindly. This chapter aims to set out the salient areas of marketing as appropriate to the independent prep school which, as far as I am aware, has not been done before. In so doing it acknowledges a view proposed by Gorard (1997) that parents and pupils do not wish to act as consumers when selecting schools. This was a claim made in relation to parents selecting maintained schools. However, with a new type of client emerging in the independent school market, it does appear they are acting in a far more consumer manner and this is discussed in this chapter.

One of the main tools in marketing is the concept of the “marketing mix”, which breaks down what is being sold and its environment into a number of sections. This is explained below and applied to the independent prep school. In relation to Gorard’s (1997) observations as mentioned above, the area which considers consumer choice from a business perspective is balanced with ideas emanating from the literature on “school choice”. With the marketing mix considered, the competition and threats to the prep school will be discussed through the use of a further marketing theory, that of Porter’s Five Forces (Porter, 2008).

Having established the market of which the prep school is a part, I will ultimately be able to engage in a discussion regarding the beliefs held by the stakeholders and whether or not they are in agreement with the literature. This is detailed in Chapters 6 through to 9.

Marketing a service

The rise of the mass market in the mid 1800's led to the development of marketing, with the marketing concept being verbalised about one hundred years later. More recently, c.1990, the emphasis shifted from the transaction to the relationship (Baker, 2000) with a shift in the way the customer was perceived. Alongside this approach was also the development of the concept of services marketing as opposed to goods marketing. This double development allowed the sharing of ideas between the two strands and enabled a focus on the wider desires and needs of the customer.

This section looks “the Seven P’s” of marketing (Rao, 2004) as a means of placing the prep school in a business context. Each of the “Seven P’s” are applied specifically to the prep school and each of the seven areas discussed in turn; some of these require greater discussion than others. The seven elements are product, price, promotion, place, people, process and physical evidence. The idea behind the marketing mix, is that so long as these seven elements are addressed within a business, in whatever mix is desired, then a marketing strategy will be in place and the business should succeed (Baker, 2003). It will be seen in the following discussion of the seven elements that there is a great deal of overlap between the seven and that one area clearly impacts on others and this too in turn impacts on the length of discussion warranted within each category.

Defining the service

Product

The first of the Ps to be discussed is the Product. When considering the product, a distinction needs to be made. At opposite ends of the continuum are goods and services. However, these are seldom “pure” and in reality, a combination of the two exist i.e. goods tend to involve some elements of service in their marketing and vice versa. It is the extent of the combinations which vary. As far as education is concerned it fits towards the extreme of the continuum and is relatively close to a pure service although it can be argued

that there is an element of goods evident too; this is discussed further below.

Service marketing uses many of the traditional concepts of goods marketing, but it also has unique characteristics and problems. A service is deemed to have four basic characteristics; intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption, perishability and heterogeneity. Table 3.1 summarises these and the ensuing marketing problems that arise with specific reference being made to independent preparatory schools. From the summary in Table 3.1, it can be seen that the independent preparatory school is in the business of offering a service to their clients; it is intangible, inseparable, perishable and heterogeneous and therefore fits the definition of a service. As far as its place on the goods/services continuum is concerned, it is conceivable that by being able to view a pupil who has passed through a particular school and assessing their level of success either at that school or in later life, then a good has been produced as that pupil is a tangible object. The counter argument to this is that it is still not the product itself that is tangible and that the observation of such a pupil would need to take into account their greater life experiences and influences rather than that purely input by the school. It would also need to remember that no two pupils would have identical experiences due to the nature of human interaction and reaction. Whilst there are supporters of both camps, and even those who use the words service and product interchangeably as far as education is concerned *e.g.* Holcomb (1993) the majority of the literature tends to support the idea that education is a service with branding enabling the service to seem more like a product via its tangible appearance (this falls into the argument regarding position on the continuum) *e.g.* Kotler (1997), Dibb, Simkin, Pride and Ferrell, (1991). The exact position on this continuum is irrelevant to the development of this specific research. It is sufficient to be aware that education is certainly towards the extreme end on the services side. However, it is worth remembering that continuums have degrees of scaling and that full adherence to the two extremes are rare, although it is often as extremes that literature deals with them. It is necessary for each individual school to identify what balance works for them.

UNIQUE SERVICE FEATURES	RESULTING MARKETING PROBLEMS	APPLICABILITY TO PREP SCHOOLS
Intangibility	<p>Cannot be stored</p> <p>Cannot be protected through patents</p> <p>Cannot be readily displayed or communicated</p> <p>Prices are difficult to set</p>	Education can be evaluated only through observation of facilities offered by the school and by observation of current and past purchasers/consumers. The education itself cannot be touched or stored.
Inseparability	<p>Consumer is involved in production</p> <p>Other consumers are involved in production</p> <p>Centralised mass production is difficult</p>	The consumer or their representative is an active part of the education being received. Other pupils in the class or school also affect the experience.
Perishability	Services cannot be inventoried	Education cannot be bottled and repeated in exactly the same form later; variations will always occur.
Heterogeneity	Standardisation and quality are difficult to control	Inter school, interclass and inter pupil variations will occur.

Table 3.1 Services characteristics, marketing problems and the independent preparatory school. (Adapted from Table 22.1 Services Characteristics and Marketing Problems Marketing by Dibb, Simkin, Pride and Ferrell, pg 678.)

Services represent an assorted group of products and an organisation may well provide more than one service, and this holds true in the case of an independent preparatory school. In the case of all independent preparatory schools, arguably, their main service is that of education. However there are also subsidiary services such as pastoral care, provision of meals, extracurricular activities, access to social networks etc. In the case of boarding schools, some of these aspects will play an even greater role than would be the case in a day school. It is often these subsidiary services however which are the differentiating element of the entire service and therefore of major importance. Some of these have been discussed in Chapter 2 and others will be discussed in Chapters 6 to 9 when key stakeholder's views are introduced.

Analysing a service

There are five main categories through which services can be analysed: type of market, degree of labour intensiveness, degree of customer contact, skill of service provider and goal of the services provider. These are summarised and applied to the world of the independent preparatory school in Table 3.2 with regard to their primary service i.e. education. This type of classification has implications. As can be seen from the Table 3.2 below, an independent preparatory school supplies a consumer market.

Within this type of market there are several factors which need to be taken into consideration. These happen to be very similar to those affecting a consumer market within the goods market too. All goods and services deliver a collection of benefits to the consumer. It is the *perception* of the benefits which needs to be nurtured and fed by a business wanting to attract customers and how this can be done will be looked at later in this chapter when the “promotion” of a service is discussed.

For now it follows to look at how consumers make decisions when purchasing a service as this should influence how services (schools) promote them.

CATEGORY	EXAMPLES	INDEPENDENT PREP
Type of Market Consumer Industrial	Repairs, childcare, legal advice Consulting, caretaking, installation	Consumer
Degree of Labour- Intensiveness Labour-based Equipment-based	Repairs, education, haircuts Telecommunications, health farms, public transport	Labour-based
Degree of Customer Contact High Low	Healthcare, hotels, air travel Repairs, home deliveries, postal service	High
Skill of the Service Provider Professional Non-professional	Legal advice, health care, accountancy Domestic services, drycleaning, public transport	Professional
Goal of the Service Provider Profit Non-profit	Financial services, insurance, health care Health care, education, government	Profit

Table 3.2 Classification of Services and the Independent Preparatory School.
(Adapted from Table 22.2 Classification of Services. Marketing by Dibb, Simkin,
Pride and Ferrell, pg 680.)

Consumers tend to make decisions in one of three ways; routine response, limited decision making and extensive decision making (Dibb, et al, 1991). It is the latter of these which is employed when buying into a preparatory school

education for a family member. According to marketing literature, whether consciously or subconsciously, generally, the buying decision process involves five stages; problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post purchase evaluation (Solomon, 1992). With an extensive decision making process, the five stages are usually gone through in the given order although it must be remembered that a client can exit the cycle at any point and that a purchase does not always occur.

There are several reasons the situation may arise that a parent identifies a “problem” (the term “problem” is being used loosely here – it may just be an acknowledgement of a different situation and not a problem *per se*) with regard to the education of their child. The first situation is where a parent is unhappy with the current education being received by their child or is unhappy with the

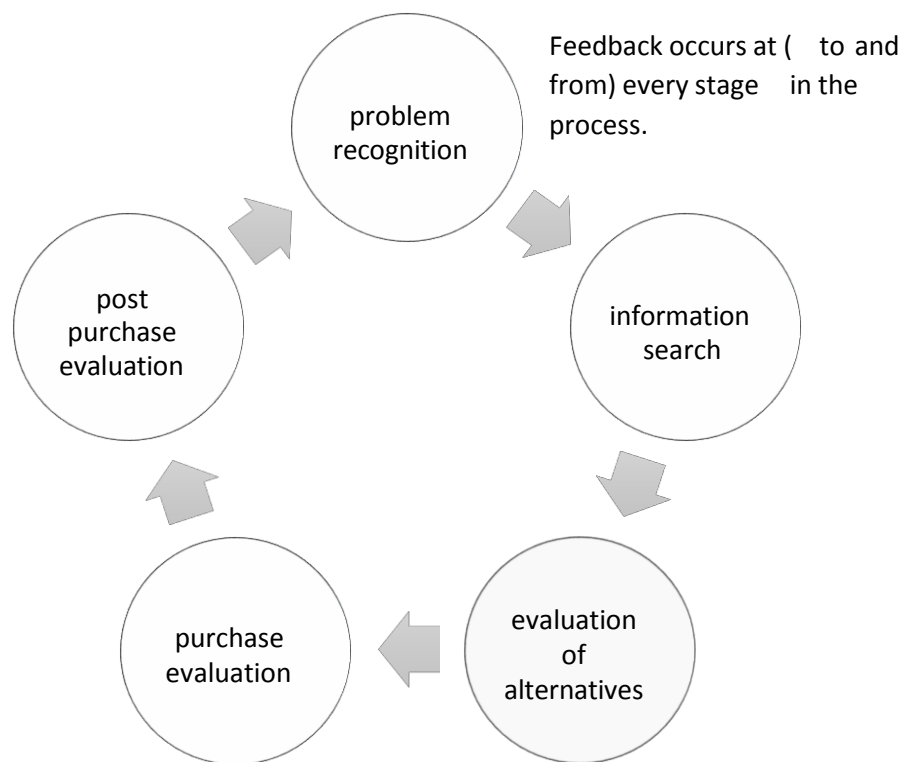


Figure 3.1 Consumer Decision Stages (Adapted from Figure 8-1, Solomon 1992, pg 241)

proposed school at transfer time between schools. Alternatively a parent may have a change in circumstances either a geographical change which, with

today's more mobile population is becoming more common place (Van Zanten, 1995), or a new ability to afford options that had previously not been available. Once the situation has arisen and a "problem" has been identified then the information search begins.

The exact nature and extent of the information search will depend upon the circumstances of the searchers. At one time, information gathering could vary greatly depending upon the financial position of the searcher, (with the better off having a wider range of schools to choose from should they wish) this no longer is necessarily a limitation, as many schools offer bursaries or scholarships. In more recent years there has also been far greater choice within the maintained sector which would promote greater information searching should the customer wish. However, the amount of information gathered varies from client to client. There are even families whom, for whatever reason, would only consider one type of education, be it either only private, or only state and therefore their information search would reflect this. Whilst marketing literature suggests that information gathering on all products being considered would be similar (Solomon, 1992), "School Choice" literature does not necessarily support this, suggesting that often school choice is a gut instinct and not a well informed decision with reasoning as one may expect (Gilbert, 1991). Another study, Gorard, (1997) suggests that only about 10% of the 90% choosing maintained sector education "actively research(ed) alternative schools and forms of schools." (p31) and Smedley (1995) commented that it was the middle-class, professional who tended to be the active choosers (Smedley, 1995). These are general statements either made about choice in the maintained sector or education in general and do not relate specifically to either independent education or the prep school specifically. Chapter 9 discusses how the information gathered in this particular study indicates that some prep school clients behave more like a typical customer in a business sense. However, even from the literature and taking choosing education in general, it is apparent that education purchasers cannot be viewed as an homogenous group with identical behaviours.

When looking at the decision making process it is necessary to consider who is actually making the decision. Marketing literature states that it is the

consumer, but as far as education is concerned there is debate as to whether the purchaser or the child is the consumer. School Choice literature looks at these distinctions. Forster (2005), Bagley, Woods and Glatter (2005), *etc* make varying claims about the child's involvement in the choice of schooling. David, West and Ribbens (1994), claimed child involvement, but not sole responsibility, through the process of visiting the school or reading the published literature. Again, much of this research refers to the maintained sector and secondary school choice in particular and are not perhaps as relevant as references to the decision making involved in choosing a prep school given that many children will be under the age of ten when this decision is made. Edwards, Fitz and Whitty (1989), furthers this by stating that from his research, the views of pupils were less relevant in the choice of private schooling. Gorard (1997) speculates that this could be due to the financial implications of such decisions. Gorard (1997) further states that it is mothers who are initially more active in any research whilst fathers become involved at the latter stages and that of all the areas, fathers are most concerned with the sporting programme on offer! The sporting aspect of the prep school was certainly highlighted by respondents in this research as being of importance and a perceived benefit of a prep school education. This was discussed in Chapter 2 and will be further in Chapters 6 to 9.

Whether the decision of school was a gut instinct, informed by social networks (Stein, Goldring & Cravens, 2011) or researched in greater depth, there are numerous reasons given for these decisions. In 1994 OECD found four categories; academic, situational, ethos and selection; three years earlier Coldron and Boulton (1991) had also found four categories, two of which were the same as the OECD results: academic, ethos, security and source of information. West *et al* produced five categories. "Comparatively little research has been carried out on parents' reasons for choosing private as opposed to state education for their children" (West, 1994 p.115) but what has been recorded varied little across independent and state sectors. Specifically however, 60% of parents said better exam results and therefore a better chance of entry to higher education and a better career were their primary reason (Bagley et al, 2005). This was supported by another research

DECISION MAKING INFLUENCE	
Personal	Demographic factors e.g. age, sex, race, income, family life cycle Situational factors e.g. external influences, time available. Level of involvement e.g. intensity and importance of the decision to the individual.
Psychological	Perception – the process of selecting, organising and interpreting informational inputs of sight, taste, hearing, smell and touch. Motive - an internal force that directs a person towards satisfying a need or achieving a goal. Ability – competitiveness and ability to perform a task. Knowledge - the individual’s familiarity with the product and their ability to apply it. Attitudes – previous knowledge and resulting positive or negative feelings towards the product/supplier. Personality - the unique characteristics and traits of an individual.
Social	The influences exerted on an individual by others and by the individual’s position in society and the associated expectations that involves.

Table 3.3 Decision making influences (Adapted from Blythe (2001) p 40 - 42)

project identifying academic advantage being noted by 23% of parents (Fox, 1990). Gorard (1997) reports other projects stating atmosphere conducive to work, good quality teaching staff, a good choice of subjects and range of facilities as being of high important in the decision making process. Similar results were revealed by this research.

There are three major categories which are believed to influence the decision making process of a consumer. These are personal, psychological and social. Table 3.3 gives an explanation of each type.

When a consumer processes product information they group products on their beliefs about that product, once the information has been gathered and considered, a decision needs to be made. At this stage the results of the evaluation have highlighted the most suitable option for that individual and as far as education is concerned will draw attention to the school which will satisfied best what is being looked for.

Finally, a decision is made and a school chosen but the process does not stop there as far as the evaluation is concerned.

Once a purchase has been made, especially with regard to the purchase of an expensive one in terms of finance and/or the future of one's child (i.e. independent education) there will often be uncertainty as to whether or not the correct decision was made. The purchaser is likely to evaluate whether or not they are receiving what they believed they would be getting.

In order to help a decision maker to make the "right" decision, a business needs to ensure that they are aware of the process through which the consumer goes and try to influence them in an appropriate manner. As can be seen in Table 3.2, education is classified as labour-based which tradition suggests is more susceptible to heterogeneity than are most equipment-based services. It is very important to recognise that the providers of the service are often perceived as the service itself and therefore strategies relating to selecting, training, motivating and controlling employees is of utmost importance.

Customer contact is high when it comes to education, meaning the consumer must be present during the production of the service. More often than not in this type of situation, the consumer goes to the supplier and not the other way around and as such, the physical appearance of the premises and the facilities on offer will be a major component in the consumer's (or extended consumer - i.e. parent) overall evaluation of the service. It is also essential that the entire process of the production is just as important as the final outcome and so, once

again, the staff must be up to this challenge. Facilities also need to be not only fit for purpose but look inviting, attractive and in good repair and that the facilities on offer are comparable if not better than other education providers which may be under consideration (Baker, 2003). These elements are touched on again later under the headings of Place and People.

Referring to Table 3.2, the fourth way in which a service can be classified is as a professional service. These tend to be more complex and highly regulated than non-professional services. This is true of education whether it is private or state. As far as the independent preparatory school is concerned they are regulated under the Education Act 2002 which set out a range of standards that all independent schools in England must satisfy as a condition of registration. The regulations cover:-

- the quality of education provided
- the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils
- the welfare, health and safety of pupils
- the suitability of proprietors and staff
- the premises and accommodation
- the provision of information and the way in which complaints are handled

(Education Act, 2002)

They are also subject to regular inspections by Ofsted or the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) and about half the independent schools in England are also regulated by the Charities Act 2006.

The goal of the service provider is also of great importance. The independent preparatory school, is a service provider which needs to make a surplus so they are able to reinvest in the school and ensure that there is enough money to maintain, progress and upkeep the standards of the school i.e. there needs to be a surplus generated. They need to ensure that they have enough pupils to break even and a greater number to provide the money for investment

in the future. As such, in marketing terms, the independent preparatory school needs to be run as a business.

It can therefore be seen that the provision of education by an independent preparatory school fits into the category of delivering a service to its customer. The customer is deemed to be the consumer, although more specifically in the case of the preparatory school, it is the consumer's family which is the customer here (e.g. parents, grandparent etc)¹⁰.

Price

The second of the marketing mix components to be considered is price. Throughout history, exchange has occurred whereby one good or service has been swapped for another i.e. bartering (Loewen, 2005). Negotiation often took place to ensure that both parties were happy. The idea of one price for all has only been around for one hundred years epitomised by Marks and Spencer and Woolworth's origins (Rees, 1973) and means that the seller must ensure that they price their product carefully and correctly as price is a large consideration of the purchaser. As the price is the only element that is going to produce income, great care needs to be taken; "pricing decisions communicate important things about your product" (Smith, 2012) - if the price is thought too low it could be perceived as of poor quality, whereas if the cost is deemed too expensive then business may be lost there too. Both the psychological and economic implications of the price need to be considered.

Whilst prep schools, an independent schools in general, often use pricing strategies such as reduced fees for a subsequent siblings, or even scholarships and bursaries, Smith believes that educational establishments are not in a position to go further and employ tactics used by other services such as bundling together several services and charging a single price (Smith, 2012) e.g. banks offering special credit allowances if both a current and savings

¹⁰ research has found that grandparents help with school fees; 16% of parents (and 25% of London parents) admitted to help from relatives to meet school fees (Independent School parent, n.d.).

account is purchased. This view is questioned in Chapter 9 given the responses offered by some of the respondents in this study.

However, unlike some services where cost is unknown at the outset (e.g. a private detective) a school is able to set the price up front. There may be added extras throughout the year such as school trips or specific hobbies/activities but these are either minimal extra cost or can be decided on a “take it or leave it” basis. The first thing that needs to be done is to cover costs. This will set the minimum price to be charged. In order to do this, staff costs, resources costs, utilities costs, maintenance and upkeep all need to be considered. Once this has been established the school will need to look at the prices being charged by its competitors (Solomon, 1992). When doing this, it needs to be careful to identify schools that are deemed as similar and not just any local independent preparatory school (see the discussion later in this chapter about what constitutes a similar school). However, there may be some markets whereby such establishments do not exist, in which case an awareness of what parents are prepared to pay needs to be considered (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). In the case of pricing a service there is more room for flexibility within the pricing strategy. “Personal services cannot be transferred from one buyer to another; so it is easier for the provider to charge different prices to different customers” (Mills, 2002).

Promotion

The third aspect of the marketing mix is promotion. When one thinks of the concept of marketing, it is usually the element of promotion which comes to mind. Where a service is concerned, it is difficult to promote in the same way as a good due to its intangible nature. Promotion means making others aware of the service and part of this takes the form of advertisements in newspapers, magazines, radio and occasionally television or internet (Burrow, 2009) in the case of the independent preparatory school. In order to carry out the promotional aspect of the marketing mix, cues need to be found which appropriately represent the service. Here, schools need to choose carefully and consider the nature of the target market thoroughly. Schools often use branding for this purpose; they use their uniform as a way of setting them apart from

their competitor, this is unique to the individual school and along with the school crest or logo easily identifies where the child is from. Another method employed is using the building and/or facilities in any promotional literature so that associations are made between the name of the school and what they can offer (Sandhusen, 2000). It is important that the school maximises the difference between the value of the service and the cost it is charging for it if they are to successfully attract new customers.

Contact personnel are critical in the promotion of a service. When a parent is enquiring about a school they are likely to either telephone the school and/or enquire at the school office about a prospectus. The staff with whom the parent(s) come into touch at this point could influence whether or not those parents will include the school within their “schools to consider” list (Sandhusen, 2000). Again, this could be what “makes or breaks” their decision on which school to choose.

Due to the labour intensive nature of the service of education, there is a variation in the quality of service, this can be a problem for services as one negative experience can counteract numerous positive experiences. Particularly with services, customers often associate the service with the service provider and this is especially so in the case of education (Sandhusen, 2000).

Open days are another device that most schools employ in order to promote their schools. This falls into the personal selling category as staff and pupils are utilised as guides and sales people for their departments. This is potentially a very powerful tool as it allows staff and prospective customers a chance to interact and allows reassurance to be offered, dissonance and uncertainty to be reduced and the reputation of the school to be promoted.

It is difficult for schools to solicit business, in person, from all potential clients. The personal selling is reduced to either current parents (i.e. trying to encourage them to send siblings to the school), or those who already had the school within their sights (i.e. through attendance at open days/ fetes/ school plays etc). One of the few ways available to schools to personally sell to

potential clients is to visit nursery groups and infant schools on special “promotion” events but unless the schools will automatically lose pupils (due to the age range of the school), it is unlikely that they would entertain such a visit from someone they would consider to be trying to poach their children. As mentioned above when discussing consumer information search, consumers tend to value word of mouth in relation to a service, probably due to its experiential nature. Present strategies that fall into this category include school newsletters and invitations to school events addressed to family and friends of the child. There is a great deal to be said though for ensuring that schools keep their present customers (both the parents and the child) happy because by so doing they are likely to talk about it to friends outside school.

Place

The fourth element of the marketing mix is Place; it is the method through which goods and/or services are moved from the manufacturer/ service provider to the user /consumer. As has already been identified, one of the characteristics of a service is that the service is inseparable from the production; consumers are involved in the production which therefore has implications for the distribution (Dibb et al, 1991). As far as the independent preparatory school is concerned, the production and consumption of the service is simultaneous; the pupil takes in the information as it is being delivered by the teacher. However, schools can offer an opportunity for pupils to be present at such an exchange by providing transportation from outreaching locations and/or establishing themselves in easily accessible locations in the first place thereby facilitating the exchange (Burrow, 2009).

Having applied the four traditional elements of the marketing mix to the field of education, it is now necessary to explore the more recently added elements too. As was mentioned earlier, the acknowledgement of the more human element involved in marketing has adjusted the marketing mix. Whilst the four traditional elements still hold firm, there are additional elements to

consider. Some of these apply specifically to the marketing of services; the others can be applied more generally.

People

People are an extremely important element of any service or experience; they can “make or break” a deal, they also play a vital role in differentiating what is offered (Bateson, 1992). Services tend to be produced and consumed at the same moment, and aspects of the customer experience are altered to meet the 'individual needs' of the person consuming it. A large aspect of this has already been covered in “Promotion” above. It is essential that all members of the organisation take their part in ensuring that the quality of the product, in this case the education provided is of a high quality and that all support staff act in an equally appropriate manner at all times to promote the establishment.

Training is essential for all staff that have anything to do with the customer. In the case of an independent preparatory school, this is likely to be all staff as they could potentially interact with parents at any time. Training should begin as soon as the individual starts working for an organization during an induction period. This will allow the new individual to learn and observe the culture of the school as well as a briefing on day-to-day policies and procedures. At this very early stage the training needs of the individual need to be identified and a training and development plan created which sets out personal goals that can be linked into future appraisals. It is highly important that a school has a strong policy of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) so that staff feel valued and that they are equipped to handle the tasks required of them. Confident, happy staff are far more likely to give a good impression than unhappy and unprepared staff and as a result attract new customers (Rampersad, 2008).

As has already been discussed goods and services are at extreme ends of a continuum and usually there is an element of both service and good in every purchase. It is just the balance of the two which varies. Education is towards the service extreme of the continuum but the service, education, is represented in a number of ways. These include:

- school crest/logo
- school prospectus
- pupils in school uniform
- building/ grounds occupied by the school
- the staff
- the student (including former student) (Burrow, 2009)

Whilst most of these elements have already been mentioned above as branding, it is nevertheless important to realise that these are the aspects which give the tangibility to a service and are therefore part of the service through association. They are the identity of the invisible service and are therefore the “goods” part of the package.

The importance of the staff has been discussed above in the section about “People”. The continual overlapping of areas highlights how interdependent all of these areas are when considering the marketing of a product. It is almost impossible to consider one area in isolation as there would be a knock on effect as a result of any decisions made.

Physical Evidence

Physical evidence is an essential ingredient of the service mix, and refers to the service environment. This the consumers will see when viewing a school, or when simply passing by and they will make perceptions based on it (Lovelock, Patterson & Wirtz, 2015). Whilst the logo, buildings etc are all visible and represent the service offered, probably, the most obvious physical evidence of education is the pupil. Possibly this may not always be the fairest way to assess the service as pupils will have been the product of many influences in their lives, they are nevertheless, probably the most obvious physical evidence of an establishment. They will be considered in many ways; their academic success, their manners, their presentation. In short, do the current and past pupils fulfil the dreams, desires and aspirations that the prospective purchasers have for their child (Solomon, 1992)?

Process

Finally is what is known as the process and this sums up the entire system involved in the purchase of the service from the time of conception through the purchase and in onto post purchase care. As far as the independent preparatory school is concerned, this includes all the policies and legal requirements, the means by which the education is delivered, the environment in which the education is delivered, the relationship formed with the pupils and their parents. It involves everyone within the school and pulls together all the other areas of the marketing mix.

Whilst the marketing mix seems to provide a comprehensive framework with which to juggle and so earn market share, a school, like any business, does not operate in a vacuum. It is a competitive arena and external forces also need to be taken into consideration.

Competitive success in the market

An independent preparatory school not only needs to ensure enough income to cover its overheads but also needs to make sure that there is enough left over to guarantee the development and progression of the establishment in the future. In order to be able to do this successfully, the leadership of the school will need to be aware of numerous external forces which could affect their success. This section of the chapter looks at Porter's Five Forces, a well-used tool which considers external and internal aspects of a wider market which would have an effect on the individual business being considered. It goes on to consider three methods by which Porter believes one can establish themselves within a market so as to ensure success. These forces and tools are commented on again in Chapter 9 in relation to the responses given by the key stakeholders in this study.

The external forces mentioned above can be categorised in two ways; the macro environment and the micro environment (Dibb et al, 1992). The macro environment is characterised by the types of forces which not only affect the

business in question but also their competitors too. Often these forces are difficult to control or influence although good public relations can go a long way in a business' favour when times are tough. Forces which fit into the macro environment category that particularly effect an independent preparatory schools are elements such as the current government and legislation, exchange rates, interest rates, demographic changes, employment prospects and socio-cultural factors (Baker, 2000). Some of these issues were commented on by respondents in this survey and are discussed in Chapters 6 to 9.

The micro environment is summarised by Michael Porter's model. Porter carried out a great deal of work in this area in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Whilst this tool may have been initiated over 30 years ago, it is still of use today and promoted as an effective method through which to analyse a market in which one either exists or wants to exist (Hill & Jones, 2008).

Figure 3.2 summarises the potential threats to an organisation such as an independent preparatory school. At the centre is the existing threat of an already competitive market. In the present climate many schools are failing to survive as their numbers drop to below a viable level. According to Association of Teachers and Lecturers' summer 2009 newsletter:

As well as individual redundancies, we have seen in the region of 25 independent schools closing in the past year. Predominantly, this has been small prep schools; their size makes them more vulnerable to a fall in pupil roll numbers. However, recently, St.David's School, a 300 year old day and boarding school ... announced it was closing...

(Anon, 2009 p1)

According to Porter there are three ways in which competitors should seek success within an industry (Hill et al., 2008). It is by identifying what your competitors are doing and endeavouring to be different that could be the key to success. In theory every educational establishment could be considered a competitor, however as seen earlier, this is not the case. The literature suggests that for a large number of people the choice of school is made through gut instinct, and by many, through the convenience of the location with Fitz, Haplin and Power (1993) stating that one third of parents felt they had no real choice regarding schools because of travel issues. Whilst comments made by

respondents to this study begs the question as to whether or not it is gut instinct which has such a large impact on school choice, or whether a new more customer style, information-gathering client is emerging, they certainly supported the idea that not every school is automatically a competitor. This is discussed further in Chapters 6 to 9.

Earlier it was discussed that the quality of the academic provision was of utmost importance to parental choice of schools, so competitors need to be identified as those who are also providing a high level of academic education. Other areas were also mentioned and these too need to be taken into account when considering ones competitors. Not only is the existence of the competitor and issue, so too is the strength of rivalry. In a market with a limited client base, the competition is likely to be far stronger than in a market where there are sufficient pupils to satisfy all providers. In the latter case it is more a matter of deciding which of the pupils you want and exactly what your niche will be.

In the former case, competition is very high and the provider needs to be proactive, utilising all of the aforementioned tools and strategies (Hill et al., 2008).

Supplier power refers to the influence that the supplier may have over the production of the product in which the business is trading. In relation to the independent school this is going to refer to the supply of educational materials: books, stationery, ICT, staff and estate. If any of these are in short supply then the supplier can either increase the price they are asking or withdraw supply altogether. The implications of this will either force a school to increase its own price for the education it is providing or work on reduced profits, both of which will result in it being less competitive. In the case of many existing Independent preparatory schools, they are in the fortunate position of owning the estate from which they operate and so supplier power would only come into force if they were wishing to expand or upgrade their estate. As far as the other educational materials are concerned, the most costly to a business would be a limit being placed on recruitment of staff. Staffing is arguably the greatest expenditure within the education business and would therefore create the necessity for greatest percentage increase cost wise

should the supply be restricted (Hill et al., 2008).

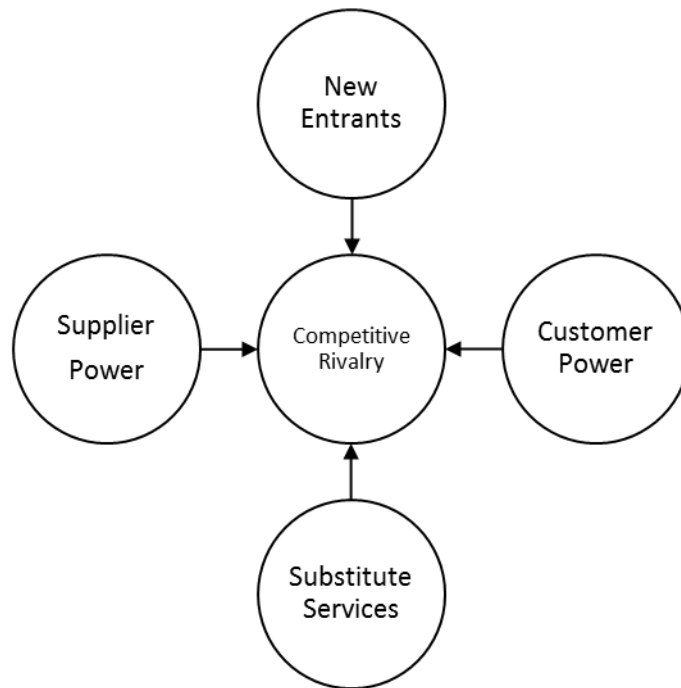


Figure 3.2 Porter's Five Forces (Porter, 1980)

Buyer power operates from the opposite end of the process. In the case of education, many of the prospective parents of independent education carry out at least some research as already mentioned. It is up to the school to ensure that they are aware of what is being offered by their competitors so that they are aware of their own unique selling points and cannot be influenced too much by buyer power.

Knowledge of one's customers too is important. The 2014 ISC Annual Census did not offer too much insight into what an Independent education purchaser may look like. They simply stated that 71.3% are from a white British background, whilst 28.7% are from a minority ethnic background (Lockhart, Gilpin & Jasiocha, 2014). A more informative analysis was given as affluent, well educated, having high expectations of what education will do for their children, controlling and anxious (Thompson and Mazzola, 2012) whilst potentially accurate, it was not quantified. Gorard (1997) cautions that different types of private schools have different clientele and that in some

circumstances, they do not differ from those using good state schools; the difference only being a dissatisfaction with the state school or a desire for smaller class sizes. These comments were made in reference to his study in Welsh schools, but it is not unreasonable to consider that the results could be extrapolated to English schools too. Gorard (1997) distinguishes between parents buying into the cheaper end of the prep school market and those at the higher price end. He suggests that often parents have no previous experience of independent education, they have educated at least one of their children in the state sector, and they are not wealthy and come from ethnic minority backgrounds. This he states supports work by Schneider in America (Gorard, 1997). At the other end of the spectrum, he claims that fee paying schools are “still more often used by parents who attended private schools themselves” (Gorard, 1997 p250), he also says of these more expensive independent schools that pupils attending them are more likely to have had a sibling also attending that type of school.

Markets can come and go depending largely on demographics and financial influence, schools need to make sure that they are aware of the trends and/or situation and are prepared to move their goal posts accordingly, assuming that their desire is that of survival. It is acknowledged that there may be situations whereby schools have been established with a specific belief in mind (*e.g.* Quaker school *etc*) and the necessary “goal post” shift might not fit with the foundation’s beliefs. In cases like this the decision to close might be preferable. However, assuming that a school is in a position and has the desire to make the required changes, the competition in the area will also affect the buyer power. As already discussed, the consumer will carry out their information search and limit their choices to a few schools. The greater the number of similar schools in an area, the greater the competition and therefore the greater the buyer power. (Dibb et al, 1992)

The threat of substitute products or services is a far wider concept than it first appears. Education is compulsory in the United Kingdom and there are established methods by which this can be provided as was investigated earlier in this chapter. At the present time it is unlikely that any substantially different method of education provision will be created. Home school by remote teacher

via the internet is still a fair way off, if it even ever happens. Different types of school may arise but these will still be within the remit of what is currently considered a competitor. The advent of Academies and Free Schools could be conceivably included in this category although whilst different are, arguably, not that different.

What schools need to be particularly aware of is what is known as indirect substitutes. These are items such as foreign holidays, home extensions/alterations *etc* which people often purchase with disposable income. Private education is not cheap and often sacrifices have to be made by families in order to send their children to such schools. It is the alternative ways in which parents could spend their money which constitute the indirect substitutes. Schools need to work hard to ensure that the child's education is the first choice for any disposable income (Baker, 2000).

New entrants to a market are far less of a threat in an already busy market although not impossible. Again, it comes down to awareness and observation to ensure that any new competitors are kept to a minimum by ensuring that they are not afforded space in the market and preferably put off entering the market in the first place! So long as an independent preparatory school has a good relationship with its clients then it is likely to be providing what its customer wants and there will be no room for new entrants.

The three identifying strategies suggested by Porter are 1) cost, 2) differentiation and 3) focus. The key is to try to achieve prominence via one of the methods, not end up being stuck in the middle of the triangle.

1) Cost refers to a method of gaining leadership within a market based upon reducing the costs of production. As far as the independent preparatory school is concerned this could be achieved by reducing the number of specialist teachers and employing staff who can teach more than one subject area. Alternatively, the quantity or quality of extras provided by the school could be reduced e.g. school meals, text and exercise books. This is a means to achieving economies of scale with the savings being ploughed straight back into marketing to increase the school's position.

2) Differentiation requires a business to win market share by supplying a unique or superior product. An independent preparatory school can do this by identifying an area of education that is not being provided generally, or in specific geographical location e.g. special needs. Branding is also an area available to schools e.g. Montessori has built their success on their name and the type of education they provide.

Competitors can quickly catch on to these new moves and so the instigator needs to remain one step ahead.

3) Focus is the method of achieving prominence favoured by small companies, of which I would include preparatory schools. This involves focusing on a small segment of a market and tailoring what is provided to their needs. This may be, in the case of the independent preparatory school, education for those who fit into a specific socio-economic group, or those of a particular intellectual ability etc. (Porter, 1980). Whatever the strategy chosen, it needs to be clear and pursued with alertness and awareness by the organisation.

Porter's Five Forces have been utilised here to address areas of an established market which could impact on a member of that market. In the case of the prep school, it has enabled the specific type of customer to be considered, and the extent of their power discussed. The competitors have been identified and related to the school choice literature mention earlier in the chapter. In this particular market, it has been established that in the foreseeable future there is unlikely to be any real issue from substitute services and new entrants of a different nature will be minimal. The concept of supplier power has been introduced and it acknowledged that this does have an impact on the prep school.

Summary

This chapter has looked at the prep school as a business; an organisation needing to make money in order to sustain itself. Its principal service is education and like any business, a school does not act in isolation. It is for this reason this chapter explores the marketing theory employed by businesses. The two main concepts used have been the marketing mix and Porter's Five Forces.

Whilst both of these have been around for many years, they have nevertheless stood the test of time and are still widely replicated in educational texts and approved by the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM).

In marketing terms, it can be seen that an independent preparatory school is thought to be a service. It is in the business of delivering education (as its main product) and this service is characterised as intangible, inseparable, perishable and heterogeneous in nature. Whilst a continuum exists and no product is deemed to be entirely a service or a good, education certainly falls heavily on the service end of the scale. Having established that the provision of education is heavily a service, then the independent preparatory school can be classified. It is considered to supply a consumer market, with a labour based intensiveness and high customer contact. The service provider is professional and the organisation is a profit making one.

The use of the Marketing Mix enabled the whole package of education to be broken down into its component parts and then discussed. Included in this discussion was the concept of school choice in education literature which did not always support the business model of consumer choice, the two were considered and combined to create the most appropriate theory in relation to education. Whilst Chapter 2 looked specifically at the prep schools development and its current nature, the product in this chapter was considered in a more theoretical manner. The concepts which contribute to the delivery of the product (education), were also examined, for example, the staff, the location and methods of promotion.

Having considered the product and its auxiliary components, the broader market in which the prep school exists was explored using Porter's Five Forces. This tool enabled the prep school client to be ascertained, and possible areas of threat (from a variety of directions) to be considered. In conjunction with Chapter 2 and 4 this establishes the theoretical, literature based foundations with which to measure, compare and contrast the views of the key stakeholders as collected in this research. Chapters 6 to 9 utilised the information presented here to discuss the responses of the key stakeholders of this study and enable conclusion to be drawn and strategies presented to counteract the threats identified.

Chapter 4

Factors Affecting Prep Schools

The previous two chapters have addressed the main parts of literature relevant to this study. An explanation as to what a prep school is and how it sits within the market place has set the scene. This chapter discusses further themes which have emerged from the literature in relation to prep schools which may have an impact on their current position or future viability.

There are two key areas within this first section; the economic situation within England at the time of this study, issues associated with schools having become coeducational. The second part of the chapter presents supporting material to issues which have been referenced in the previous two chapters but where further exploration had not been appropriate at that point. These issues are the schools acting as charities and the associated implications, the concepts involved in the rise and fall of middle schools within England and finally, schools which may be considered competition to the prep school. The section on the middle schools is included to ascertain whether or not there were any academic and/or social justifications for their arrival and decline and whether there are any theories which would be applicable to the prep school as they educated a similar aged pupil.

In the later analysis chapters (Chapters 6 to 9), it will be discussed as to whether or not any of these plausible threats as identified in the literature were in any way identified and acknowledged by the key stakeholders in this study, or if there were other areas they identified which the literature had not.

Possible threats to the prep school

There are a number of threats which have been identified as having a potential impact on the prep school. Competition and school management have been addressed in the previous two chapters. This chapter looks at the economy of England at the time of conducting the research. The history to and state of, the economy is discussed here. The second area which will be looked at is the issue of schools becoming co-educational.

The economy

This section considers the economic climate in England during the last decade. From conception to completion, this research has spanned a decade and the economic climate in existence now is different from what was present at the beginning of this study. The changes and implications of such changes, are of importance to this study.

With hindsight, the economy in 2004 was in a period of sustained growth (Treasury, 2009), despite this, it was not necessarily being perceived as such by everyone. Parents I had spoken with in schools were often commenting, at the time, about the cost of private education and the difficulties with paying for it. It was such comments which raised thoughts in my head. The last recession had been nearly ten years previous and had seen house prices fall and the introduction of the poll tax (Richardson and Copus, 2011) and it is conceivable some were still recovering personally. However, there was worse to come with Davies, (2010) commenting “the crisis which engulfed the world, beginning 2007, was the most destructive economic event of the last eighty years” (p.1). Triggered by events in the USA mortgage market, the ripple was felt globally (Davies, 2010), by September 2008 the failure of Lehman Brothers, the Wall Street investment bank was realised and the

financial crisis ensued (Blinder, 2013). By 2009 the global economy had shrunk by 1% (in a period with a growth of three times this amount per annum for the previous ten years) (Davies, 2010). In the UK, “the origins of the banking crisis were many and varied, including low real interest rates, a search for yield, apparent excess liquidity and misplaced faith in financial innovation” (Treasury, 2009, p3). Whilst the exact reasons do not need to be explored, it is necessary to understand that this was a prolonged period of uncertainty and hardship. House prices had fallen, unemployment was high, there were public spending cuts, taxes were increased, and lending to small businesses was severely restricted with 30,000 of them being bankrupted by December 2009 (Richardson et al., 2011). This had a twofold effect on prep schools, many of whom were small businesses themselves; they not only had the restriction from the supply side of their business but were also potentially to be affected from the demand side too.

At the time of writing the financial forecast is not one of immediate recovery, with many families having suffered already, it may now be the point at which private education will be the next casualty from household spending. A Headmaster colleague, predicted at the outset of this recession that the 2010/2011 intakes would be where schools would suffer. This is backed up by reports in various newspapers e.g. The Independent (Garner, 2010) which reported that in the recession of the 1990’s it was two to three years before the impact was fully felt by independent schools. It also reported that the ISC recent annual survey showed that the independent schools sector had recorded the largest drop in pupils in the last year than since the previous recession (1990). The previous recession saw pupil numbers drop by 2.4% (MacLeoad, 2009) which, appears a small percentage and on average represents only two pupils per ISC school according to David Lyscom, the ISC's chief executive. The Independent (Garner, 2010) also reported that there has been a large increase in the number of overseas students and these now account for one in three boarders, this information will inevitably affect the statistics already quoted as the ISC data is for all ISC schools and not purely prep schools. This therefore means that the average number of pupils leaving prep schools is possibly higher than that already mentioned. Whilst the loss of two, three or even four pupils does not seem a huge number, it is likely to be the cost of at least a member of staff and this will have a big impact

in particular on smaller schools and whether or not they remain viable. The implications of the economy and economic climate are discussed further in Chapter 9 when married with the views of the interviewed stakeholders.

Becoming co-educational

Although not a new consideration, something that had already been underway for a number of years was the evolution of the prep school from a single sex to a co-educational establishment. Whilst there were a number of reasons for this happening, it was the implications of such a decision which were raised by parents and prep Heads in this research, e.g. small numbers of girls in years 7 and 8. This section looks at the reasons for this change and lays out the potential implications of such decisions.

As already discussed in Chapter 2, preparatory schools were traditionally a male domain where boys were prepared for their lives at “Public School” (Leinster-Mackay, 1984). In the 1970’s some of these schools saw the need to take on girls in order to keep them economically viable (Walford, 1991). In so doing they were able to admit greater numbers and therefore earn greater fees and also compete with other establishments which were already coeducational and had support of parents wanting to educate their children of different genders in the same school. Since then, schools have become coeducational for other reasons too: they were considered a “civilising” influence and they were also considered to enhance or maintained the school’s academic standards.

This inevitably had implication which some schools addressed better than others. In transforming from a boys school, as was typically the case as far as prep schools are concerned, to a coeducational establishment, a number of issues needed to be considered if it were to be done successfully. Whilst it could be argued that if a school was successful in teaching boys, then simply adding girls would not be problematic, it is not quite so easy and could be the difference between being a boys school with girls and a genuinely integrated co- educational school (Fuller, Dooley and Ayles, 1997). Consideration needs to be given to a school’s culture and its gender bias. Simply keeping things the same but admitting girls could be detrimental to the whole establishment and result in its ultimate failure.

Disciplinary policies, dress codes, extra curricula activities are just a few of the issues which need thought. School decoration in the sense of pictures representing achievements need balancing. Whilst the girls and their families are aware they are joining what was a single sex establishment, they will not want to be constantly reminded of it (Schmuck, Nagel and Brody, 2002). Schools are about far more than simply academic education (Taylor and Ryan, 2005), and issues beyond the academic curriculum also need addressing. The girls need to be able to participate in all aspects of school life; the area of sports being one. Whilst it is conceivable that the girls could join in with P.E. lessons with the boys, it would be less appropriate for them to participate in the more male sports such as rugby and cricket. In order to rectify this, many schools employed specialist female sports staff to aid with this area (Schmuck, Nagel and Brody, 2002). Changing facilities also needed addressing.

At the time of going co-educational, the number of girls attracted to these schools was initially small; possibly because the issues mentioned above had not been totally addressed. Over time the numbers of girls in such schools has grown and many are now fully coeducational with numbers to reflect this. However, in some areas similar issues still affect the Year 7 and 8 age ranges of schools. From experience and conversations with parents it is evident that they are often loath to risk waiting until 13+ to transfer their daughters to senior school in case they don't get in or because they are concerned that their daughters would be disadvantaged as the other girls would have formed friendship groups from the age of 11. This results in the number of girls left in the top two years of prep schools being significantly diminished and then the issues regarding socialising and sports opportunities being raised. It has to be acknowledged however, that not all schools are affected in this way and it is of interest as to why some prep schools can continue in a pretty balanced manner as far as gender is concerned all the way through to 13+, whilst others cannot. It is also worth mentioning that there is not the same issue with boys leaving at 11, probably due to their traditional transfer being at 13; whilst there are some that do, it is often not considered normal practice (whereas it is for the girls).

Some of the respondents to this research themselves highlighted some of the issues associated with becoming co-educational. Even though the schools were not recently converted, issues still existed and this impacted on decisions made by some

parents and concerns expressed by others. These areas will be looked at in later chapters when the key stakeholders' responses are analysed.

Supporting material

The purpose of this section is to explore material which has impacted upon this research but in a more supporting manner; the introduction of the 2006 Charities Act and the closure of the middle schools. It is also worth having an understanding of the implications to a school of holding the title of a charity as this has an impact upon how it can operate as a business and will certainly need to be borne in mind by senior management teams when operating in a competitive market.

The second area considered within this section refers to the closure of middle schools. These were part of a three tier education system within the maintained sector and mirrored closely the age range of the prep school under consideration in this research. The purpose of their inclusion in this research is to consider why they were established in the first place and then why the decision was made to close them in order to ascertain whether or not there was any academic rationale for either decision. In so doing, it may be possible to extrapolate the findings to prep schools and see if any lessons can be learnt.

Schools as charities

Charities “don't pay tax on most income and gains if use[d] ... for charitable purposes - this is known as ‘charitable expenditure’.

This includes tax:

- on donations
- on profits from trading
- on rental or investment income, *eg* bank interest
- on profits ... an asset, like property or shares [is sold or disposed of] when ... property [is bought]” (Anon., 2015)

It can therefore be seen why it is beneficial to a school to operate as a charity. However, in order to qualify as such, there are various criteria which need to be fulfilled. The Charities Act was amended and updated in 2006 and in so doing caused much discussion and disagreement between the Charities Commission (CC) and the Independent Schools Council (ISC) in particular over wording, intention and interpretation. It was eventually amended again following a judicial review to clarify some of these issues. With the change in legislation there could be implications for the prep school. In addition, the inclusion of this also explains the development of a school as a charity and the implications of it being a charity. There are certain business related aspects referred to in Chapter 2 and 3 for which this knowledge is useful and it also highlights another aspect of running a school of which a Head needs to be aware.

This section will look at two key phrases “charitable purpose” and “public benefit”, to establish what these mean as far as the 2006 Act is concerned and I will determine why schools are considered charities at all.

A charity, is defined by the 2006 Act as being “a body or trust which is for charitable purpose that provides benefit to the public” (Charities Act, 2006). Whilst all charities always had to have charitable purposes (or aims) that were for public benefit, the 2006 Act, requires them to explicitly demonstrate this and to report on their public benefits. It is no longer presumed, as it once was, that public benefit is being offered by charities that advance education, or religion, or relieve poverty.

The 2006 Act, categorises a charity under one of 12 specific headings and one general heading. It is now expected that ALL existing charities and those seeking registration will have a purpose of public benefit. However, the Act does not actually define “public benefit” and The Charities Commission itself admits that the meaning of “public benefit” is not always straightforward but it does offer guidelines for those needing to address this issue. In reality these guidelines are rather vague and not institute specific. Due to the Act negating to define “public benefit”, establishments must turn to case law for such support (Sanders, 2007).

If case law is consulted, it emerges that two distinct elements of “public benefit” must be present if an institution is to be granted charitable status; the purpose of the establishment is to benefit and that the benefit be offered to either the entire, or

sufficient section of the public. These public benefits need to be clear and fulfil the criteria laid down in the guidelines (as mentioned above), they also need to be reported in the Trustees' Annual Report. The Charity Commission state that where establishments are deemed to have failed the public benefits test, they will be given appropriate time depending upon what needs to be addressed (Charity Commission, 2013).

In the case of independent schools these public benefits can be seen as first to offer education to its pupils (purpose) and secondly to offer the education to a large enough pool of potential pupils who may be considered suitable for a place in the school.

The expectations and changes introduced by the passing of the 2006 Act, have been outlined above but how do these effect schools?

With the passing of the 2006 Act, the onus fell on the schools not only to advance education as before (charitable purpose b), but to offer "public benefit" and to demonstrate and report that it is being offered. The guidance from this Act on exactly what was "public benefit" was vague and David Lyscom, the chief executive of the ISC, amongst others, argued that simply by existing, the independent schools are offering public benefit as they educate over 500,000 pupils which the state would otherwise have to educate. The ISC estimate that this is a saving to the state sector of approximately £2.5 billion per year (Lawson, 2009).

Following a High Court ruling it was decided that so long as the benefit on offer was real and not tokenistic then it would be deemed appropriate, so supporting local state schools, sharing facilities with the community and bursaries all counted as "public benefit". It was also made clear that subsidies to school fees were equally appropriate as 100% bursaries (Synge, 2012).

Although as was discussed in Chapter 3 it is often the Bursar who deals with the financial side of the running of the school, it is nevertheless necessary for the Head to be aware of regulation, stipulation and implications for the business of which he carries the title "Head". The Heads in this particular study when specifically questioned about the possible impact of the changes to the Charities Act all showed an awareness of this legislation and were very confident that their schools had been already fulfilling its criteria for years and so were unconcerned about the changes.

One Head was pleased with the changes as he felt it would give him more ammunition with his Governors when it came to offering Bursaries *etc*, as it was they who needed convincing!

In addition to having an understanding of the implications of being deemed a Charity, it is useful to understand the rationale for opening and closing middle schools within the UK. Middle schools are an institution educating children of similar ages to those in a prep school and existed for about 30 years in the UK. They also exist in other countries e.g. USA, New Zealand, and are still integral parts of their education systems today.

Middle schools

“Middle schools” developed in the 1970s and in many counties were in existence for about twenty years. This section looks at whether there are any lessons to be learnt from the middle school that could be applied to the prep school.

Hargreaves stated “English middle schools are in a position of severe crisis (Wallace and Tickle, 1983; Wallace 1985). Their doom has been predicted (National Union of Teachers, 1979); their disappearance prophesied (Fiske, 1979; Razzell, 1978).” (Hargreaves, 1986 p2). Enlightened words or words that created a self-fulfilling prophecy? There are clear indications that there were problems with middle school education in the late 1970s and early 1980s but how did such a promising idea, which, at this stage, was less than thirty years old, go so wrong? Are there lessons to be learnt from the middle school or do they have little bearing on what is happening in the independent market?

The Education Act 1964 enabled the development of middle schools but the reasons for their establishment seemed to be to make use of buildings, to ensure all pupils transferred to secondary schooling, to avoid large comprehensive schooling and to facilitate movement between the maintained and independent sectors (Dunford & Sharp, 1990; Hargreaves, 1986). It appears that an academic reasoning for their establishment was almost an afterthought. That is not to say that there were not noises being made about their academic and developmental advantages, but rather that the acceptance of the middle school by government appears to have

been convenience driven.

As early as the point of establishment, there were voices arguing the educational benefits of middle schools and it is these benefits which are worth exploring to see if they can be equally applied to the prep school. Blyth (1980), states some of the early comments as:

- their ability to make use of the best ideas of primary education
- their ability to assist pupils during a critical transitional stage of their personal development and educational career;
- their ability to alleviate the pressures on upper school education due to their sheer size.

The last of these comments is perhaps the most self-explanatory. It suggests that by spreading pupils across more establishments there will be better use of facilities and resources at age appropriate levels. The other ideas however have several angles to explore. Firstly, the concept of combining the best practices of secondary education and primary education has merit. Although primary teachers are well trained and qualified they will still undoubtedly have least favourite subjects that they are forced to teach because they are a “class teacher”. By adopting the subject specialist approach of a secondary school, pupils will be in a position to be taught each of their subjects by teachers who love what they are teaching. Instilling a love of, and enthusiasm for, a subject is of critical importance, especially when pupils are young. It is at this point that a desire to learn is fuelled. Malcolm Barber’s (2007) report on the need for quality teachers stressed the importance of good primary level education: “The negative impact of low performing teachers is severe, particularly during the early years of schooling. At the primary level, students that are placed with low-performing teachers for several years in a row suffer an educational loss which is largely irreversible ... All the evidence suggests that even in good systems, students who do not progress quickly during their first years at school ... stand little chance of recovering the lost years.” (Barber & Mourshed, 2007 p12). If by chance a child ends up having a class teacher for a couple of years in a row who’s more of an arts than science specialist, a great deal of harm could be caused to some children’s learning (Morgan & Morris, 1999). The obvious argument against this is that many teachers who pursue a secondary subject specific route, as opposed to the primary class teacher route, do

so for a love and strong understanding of their subject. It is unlikely therefore that they will want to teach younger children, preferring the rigours of developing their subject at a higher level *i.e.* GCSE and A level (Cameron & Trivedi, 2005). The researcher suggests that most likely a different type of graduate would be attracted to the teaching profession who would be suitable for middle school teaching, although as it currently stands they would have to qualify as either a junior school or secondary teacher first as training course (degrees, PGCEs) purely geared to the middle school age range are few and far between.

By having subject specific teachers there is also the opportunity for children to learn a wider range of subjects at younger ages. Not only is there the chance of learning additional skills at a younger age, pupils are often in the fortunate position to be able to use specialist equipment *e.g.* in science labs and technology rooms at a stage earlier than their peers in junior schools. This will inevitably build their confidence and allow them a more hands on approach to learning. The benefits of exposure to different learning styles are well recorded (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohter & Bjork, 2008).

A combination of the class-based approach of the primary school and the moving between-lessons approach of the secondary can be employed on a sliding scale in a middle school. This would gradually allow pupils more freedom as they got older but whilst they were still in the confines of a relatively small and familiar environment. It is not just a matter of extending primary education for a few more years. This combined approach would also have benefits to the class teacher of the lower years as they would have the help of subject specialists on hand to deal with any misconceptions or difficulties.

This relatively small and familiar environment, is of large importance when trying to support pupils through this “critical transitional stage” (Blyth, 1980) of adolescent life. The third of Piaget’s four cognitive structures occurs during the ages of eight to twelve years (Stewart, 1978). This concrete operational stage is where children begin to think logically about concrete events but it depends upon concrete referents. It therefore seems sensible to provide children with these concrete references by educating them in an environment specifically for them. Not only this, but as Blyth (1980) writes “there is a more general claim that these middle years, eight to thirteen, are associated with a distinct stage in social and emotional development, one for which the family atmosphere of the first school and the youth culture of the high school are both inappropriate” (Blyth, 1980 p.24).

It is at this critical time in their lives that pupils need space in which to develop without negative influences from older adolescence and without feeling they are still “babies”. A middle school environment provides such an atmosphere (Stewart, 1978).

Behaviour in our schools is getting worse, according to Ofsted and recent news articles have quoted the Education Secretary Ruth Kelly as promising to take a “zero tolerance” approach (Coughlan, 2005). This “zero tolerance” approach is not always as easy as it seems as staff can be put at risk. The writer feels that this is not the sort of situation that younger pupils should have to witness. If this is to what the younger pupils aspire then it is likely to be difficult to break the cycle. By separating these pupils and educating them in different establishments, it is highly likely the cycle could be broken. Admittedly, pupils will mix out of school but if it is clear that this behaviour is not acceptable when they are younger and try bringing it into school, then they will learn. Much of it is to do with the size of a pupil too. By the time they reach fifteen an adolescent male can be very intimidating and more difficult to discipline as behaviour patterns are more entrenched. Behaviour is all about learning so the earlier learning of correct patterns of behaviour occurs, the less there is to correct as a pupil gets older (Yeomans & Arnold, 2013).

The size and the intimidation factor of older pupils is also an issue. It is suggested that Year Seven pupils could feel unsettled in their first days at secondary school due to the sheer size of the older pupils and size of the school. To address this it is proposed that these pupils are brought into school a day or so earlier than the rest of the pupils so that they can become familiar with their environment without the added concerns of those older than them. Some schools have gone further by having their Year Seven’s remain in a given form room with the specific subject teachers going to the class instead of the pupils walking around to different subject teacher’s rooms. The timetable is also arranged so that the Year Sevens have a different lunchtime from the others, therefore minimizing the amount of external contact. John Cannon (2005), makes an impassioned plea in an article to the Times Educational Supplement (TES) where he decries the annual meetings discussing the same old issues each year of the problems of Year Seven. He makes a valid point about the fact that hormonal activity is rampant in eleven and twelve year olds, a situation which is magnified due to, as he puts it, “secondary schools are much larger than primary schools and ...the pool of

difficult disaffected pupils coming together in one place ‘goes nuclear’ with the sudden surge of rebelliousness multiplied many times over” (Cannon, 2005). There is another argument in favour of the middle school; whilst the pupil’s hormones are running wild, it would be better to contain them in a smaller environment (Symonds, 2015).

Both anecdotal and research evidence suggests a dip in motivation and attainment in the first two years in secondary schools. The National Middle Schools’ Forum (NMSF) suggests that there was a noticeable decline in pupils learning behaviour in Years 7 and 8 in a two-tier system (National Middle Schools’ Forum, 2002). In fact, research by Professor Jean Ruddock of Cambridge University has suggested that this dip might be as much as a third in science (Williams, 2003). Yet this drop did not appear when children stayed on in middle schools (Gillard, 2011). This is of as much importance as intellectual results being achieved. As reported by BBC News Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education, pointed out that disaffected youngsters were “disappearing from the education system and then reappearing in the courts” (Anon, 2002). She emphasised the links between educational failure and teenage crime saying that 50% of youngsters serving custodial sentences had a reading age of 11 or under and that a quarter of those serving sentences had levels of numeracy ten years below their chronological age. This is evidently a problem not only for the individuals concerned but for society as a whole as it highlights the links between criminality and disaffection with learning. The implication being that if children were stimulated and kept interested in education, at an appropriate level for their ability, (as would be the case in middle schools which had addressed the loss of momentum in Years 7 and 8 in a two-tier system), then they would have greater literacy and numeracy skills and be less likely to offend.

This ethos is summed up well in comments made by Pinder (2003) who says “Evidence from inspections show nine to thirteen middle schools outperform other forms of schooling for creating positive working ethos and providing quality and range in curriculum and other learning opportunities as well as maintaining and developing academic standards” (Pinder, 2003). This highlights the benefits of middle school education from an academic and social perspective.

Not only does inspection evidence offer support to the merits of middle school

education, so too do findings of two research projects, one carried out by Professor David Jesson of York University in 1999 (Jesson, 1999) and the other by Nigel Wyatt, the Executive Officer of the National Middle Schools' Forum, 2012 (Wyatt, 2012). It is beneficial to consider these studies to ascertain whether any possible longer term advantages of a three-tier system are evident. Both of these pieces of research look into the achievement of pupils who transfer between schools at different ages. The latter piece of research sets out to see if the findings of the former still hold true and with the use of the newly available valued added information, published by the government, whether the claimed success can be extended to KS4 too. This second study also uses the value added information to analyse the improvement of a new cohort from KS2 to KS3 using the information from the national performance tables for 2002 and 2003. Whilst the limits of relying entirely on value added¹¹ or examination results is acknowledged, these results nevertheless are of interest as the consistently higher results seem to support the synergistic success that the school's ethos and environment provide in support of discussions earlier in this chapter.

The findings from Jesson's research, show that pupils who entered their secondary schools at either the age of twelve or thirteen did better in all areas than other entry ages, with the exception of English for those who had attended only a junior school (Jesson, 1999). Overall success however, for the middle school, and especially for the 9–13 middle school, is clear. These results were supported by the findings of Wyatt when he looked at the 2002 and 2003 statistics of progress between KS2 and KS3 as published by the DFES in their performance tables (Wyatt, 2012). From the evidence published in the results tables (Wyatt, 2012) it can be seen that in schools where pupils enter at ages other than eleven, their progress is consistently greater during the KS3 period. This supports the findings of Jesson in his earlier study (Jesson, 1999). Both the 2002 and 2003 results show there is greater value added progress between the two bench marks of KS2 and KS3 examinations in schools where pupils enter at twelve or thirteen years of age (Wyatt, 2012). The highest value added progress and highest average points score however, is within the schools where pupils attend between the ages of either ten (or eleven) and fourteen. An interesting result as this is an unusual age range,

¹¹ *Value added* is a measure of the progress students make between different stages of *education*. (Department of Education, 2014)

offered by only a handful of schools and is perhaps a throwback from the original suggestion by Leicestershire when the whole concept of middle schools first arose.

From the more usual age ranges within schools, the best performer in both years studied were the schools where pupils entered at the age of thirteen. This is of significance as it is the age range which mirrors that of prep schools being considered in this thesis. When Wyatt extended the study to KS4 to assess whether progress was still being maintained at this higher level, his results showed that the same valued added progress was being made as seen from the KS 3 and 4 results, irrespective of the age at which the pupils entered the school. This suggests that the academic benefits of the three-tier system do not have long lasting benefits despite the apparent better use of Years 7 and 8.

Having considered examination results, it is appropriate to put forward the concern of Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools (HMI) which noted that many primary school pupils in Year 6 failed to make good progress after the KS2 tests which are sat early in the summer term. It goes on to say that, in contrast middle school pupils continue without a hiatus in their education as they begin to pursue the KS3 syllabus. There have always been concerns about the length of a school's summer holiday and documentation produced as to how much is forgotten by pupils during this time - it is conceivable that this will only be made worse if Year 6 pupils have, in effect, an extended summer holiday whereby they may attend school but be given holding activities and threats. This may well be a contributing factor to the problems already discussed of Year 7 and 8 apathy.

Carole Soden, chairwoman of a Wiltshire working party into the future of the three tier system in the county, in an article from the BBC in 2002, is quoted as saying "we've been concerned for some considerable time about the progress in the middle school system, the children are not making the same progress as children in a two-tier system" (Anon, 2002a). With strong evidence elsewhere in support of middle schools it is questionable whether or not it was middle schools per se that were the problem in Wiltshire or whether there was some other issue causing children's lack of progress.

There were two main reasons behind the decisions to close the middle schools; one being financial, the other the introduction of the National Curriculum by the Conservative Government in the late 1980s. The financial savings created by closing middle schools were twofold. Due to falling rolls, middle schools were

becoming expensive to run. In closing them there were immediate savings. However, pupils needed to be educated and so they were placed in existing, local lower and upper schools whose age ranges had been adjusted accordingly. This meant that more children were being educated in these schools and therefore there was a saving there too (economies of scale¹²).

The second decision to close middle school came about with the passing of the 1988 Education Act and the introduction of the National Curriculum and with it the Key Stage divides which caused the most problems to middle schools. Middle schools were typically for pupils aged 10 to 14, but the new key stages covered ages five to seven (KS1), ages 7 to 11 (KS2) and ages 11 to 14 (KS3), this meant the Key Stages straddled across the schools with pupils transferring from school to school, mid key stage. With pupils transferring from a variety of schools, the logistic of managing this would be considerable. (Gillard, 2011). The new key stages better fitted the two-tier system of education.

It can be seen that whilst there were many good arguments in favour of the middle school and their social and academic benefits but whilst these did not seem to be high on the list of considerations at their conception, these benefits can be transferred to the independent sector and be equally applicable to the prep school of this study. This concept is returned to again in Chapter 9.

Competitors

In the previous chapter we looked at the concept of competition from the market perspective and considering it from the standpoint of marketing strategy. In this section, the specific establishments which could be considered as competition to prep schools are considered.

¹² This is to say, fewer, larger schools allowed better value for money per pupil. There were money savings through fewer buildings needing upkeep and resourcing.

These include state comprehensive schools, state grammar schools, state academies and free schools, independent junior/senior schools and prep schools.

Many of these schools have been in existence for some time and will therefore (if they were going to be) have already been competition for the prep school. There is a great deal of variation in the success of schools, a look at OFSTED reports and league tables demonstrate this. Whilst some are considered poor and with low academic achievement, which can be due to a wide variety of reasons, it does have an impact on the decision making of some parents. Therefore there are many schools which would not be considered as competition to a prep school. On the other hand, there are many very successful state schools, including a number of selective grammar schools which parents would be keen to send their children to and of which Head teachers are aware as schools to which they lose some children.

In the independent sector too there are a number of schools which are considered to be prep school competitors. If money were no object a great number more parents would send their children to a private school (Simon, 2001; Walberg & Bast, 2003). The schools within this sector considered are junior/senior independent schools (either separate or of “one stop shop” nature), of which there are a variety; ranging in academic success, size, sports available *etc.* Other prep schools also fall into this category.

All of these have existed in the market place for a number of years and will therefore fall into the category classed by Porter as “Competitive rivalry” – one of the Five Forces acting on a business (Porter, 2008). Into the category of “New Entrants” and possibly “Substitute Services”, falls the Academies and Free Schools and it is these that could pose a real threat to the prep school.

In America, with the opening of “charter schools”, which are very similar to the new Free Schools in England, the private sector lost 6% of their enrolments. If a similar pattern is evident in England, this could impact on

the viability of some of the prep schools.

The academies programme was introduced in 2000 with an intention of improving competition and standards within education (West, 2014). The first three academies setting up in 2002. By 2012 there were 1165 secondary academies (Gorard, 2014). The initial phase of the academies programme saw failing schools close and then re-open as academies. Under the Conservative- Liberal Democrat coalition government, two new types of academy were introduced; successful state schools could apply to become academies and new schools could open being called Free Schools (Walford, 2014). The coalition also extended the concept to primary and secondary schools.

These schools were all centrally funded by the government and no longer under the umbrella of the Local Education Authority. They had more flexibility in the curriculum they delivered and could opt out of the National Curriculum if they wished. They were Independent schools within the maintained sector.

When the first three academies were established, they were quickly considered to be a success with improved grades and results (Gorard, 2014). The by 2008 free schools were proving to be successful and benefitted from an increased birth rate and the poor economic situation with some previously fee paying parents deciding to move from the private sector (Walford, 2014). By January 2013 roughly fifty percent of state secondary schools in England had were academies with “attainment of pupils entering academies significantly improve[ing] after they became sponsored academies” (West, 2014 p342). In August 2013, of the twenty four free schools inspected by OFSTED, four were considered outstanding and ten classed as good (Walford, 2014). With such positive reports, it is highly plausible that parents consider such options as competitors to the private sector.

However, whilst statistics show a 1.3 per cent rise pupils enrolled in the English schools since January 2014, this is being reported as mainly due to an increase in birth rate, with numbers in also increasing slightly (by 0.7 per cent), but holding reasonably steady since 2005, at about 580,000 pupils (Drake, 2015). Which would suggest that unlike America, the advent of the

academies have not drawn parents away from the independent sector as may have been expected.

Summary

This chapter has addressed, from a theoretical point, issues raised by the key stakeholders which have not been included elsewhere in this document. The first of these was the protracted economic situation in England over the past 10 or so years. It has been seen that, although at the conception of the research, the economy was reasonably stable, the benefits of this were not being enjoyed by all. Beyond knowing at the time however, was the onset of a severe world economic crisis. This was explained and the implications for prep schools considered. In the later analysis chapters, this is looked at further as it was the key area of concern of the majority of respondents in this research.

Issues involved with schools becoming co-educational establishments were discussed as there were potential issues that may have arisen from this.

Having looked at the areas which arose during the literature search that may conceivably impact on the prep school, the chapter then moved to looking at the remaining literature to support the study. The two main concepts; the prep school as a school and as a business were addressed in previous chapters, here the concept of schools as charities was considered as it has an impact on what a school needs to do to qualify as a charity.

Next middle schools were considered as establishments which educated children of similar ages to prep schools. Here the reasons for the establishment of such schools were considered and then the reasons for their closure also look at. Of interest was the emerging picture that middle schools were not established for their academic benefits but rather out of convenience and like their appearance, their disappearance cannot be argued along academic

lines. However, their existence did have academic merit and support. This chapter has looked at the rationale behind the rise and decline of the middle school with the purpose of identifying information which could support the existence of prep schools. This is discussed further in Chapters 6 to 10.

Finally, the competition, which had been mentioned from a marketing perspective in the previous chapter, was considered. This was considered mainly from the point of new entrants into the market *i.e.* academies. It was felt that these types of school as new to the educational market place and being considered independent schools within the state sector may be of threat to the prep school and worth discussion should they be raised by key stakeholders as such.

These first three chapters have addressed the literature issues pertinent to this research and will be further discussed after the data has been presented. The next chapter looks at the methodology employed to ascertain the views of identified key stakeholders of the prep school.

Chapter 5

Methodology

Patton, 2002 states “[P]urpose is the controlling force in research. Decisions about design, measurement, analysis and reporting all flow from purpose. Therefore, the first step in a research process is getting clear about the purpose.” (p213). It is therefore necessary, right from the start, to be clear about the focus and scope of this project.

The research objective of this study is to discover what the perceptions of key stakeholders of independent prep schools can tell us about the current position and future viability of such The “key stakeholders” are deemed to be: schools in England.

- 1) Parents of current prep school pupils - those purchasing the product (education in a prep school)
- 2) Heads of prep schools,
- 3) Heads of senior schools who typically receive prep school pupils and finally
- 4) Governors involved with the running of prep schools
- 5) Governing bodies of prep schools.

These are the people who are involved with existing prep schools either at the point of purchase, provision or at the receiving of the product produced. The rationale for the choice of key stakeholders was presented in the Introduction (Chapter 1). However, despite these being identified and interviewed, the data collected from the IAPS representative and prep school governors was not considered robust enough to be included in the evaluation of data in this research given the nature of the responses and the small number of such responses.

This chapter looks at how this research was carried out and considers the pros and cons of the methodologies and methods considered and eventually chosen. It goes on to discuss how sample sizes were decided upon, how the specific respondents were chosen and how the data for each stakeholder was gathered and analysed. Finally the important issue of ethics is explored and reference made to how it specifically applied to this project.

The research was prompted by my very broad concern as to whether or not there was a future for the prep school in its current form. This question was driven due to a combination of issues that were at the time effecting prep schools i.e. the prolonged economic downturn, the introduction of the 2006 Charities Act, the increasing number of schools becoming co-educational and the closure of middle schools. Following numerous conversations with staff and parents involved with the prep school, I considered that these four issues could have a potential impact on the future of the prep school as it currently stood. Given the lack of existing research in the field of independent prep schools, the focus of this research was refined further and became a more open ended investigation with a desire to make a contribution to the knowledge of such establishments. The aforementioned “four threats” took a back seat and a greater interest emerged as to what key stakeholders currently involved in the prep school felt. With this shift in direction, the research was refined further still, the specifics of which will be considered later in this chapter.

After a number of considerations, including logistics, need for confidentiality and a belief that rural and urban areas may have a different set of parents/pupils, beliefs and issues, two geographic regions were eventually settled on for comparison’s sake; one, the London region – considered urban, the other, the Rest of England (rural). Within these two regions prep schools were chosen and then associated senior schools selected. The key stakeholders were approached and interviewed to gather the desired information for the research. Having acquired this information, it then needed organising before it was analysed; this was done through manual coding and grouping of the data.

In essence, this chapter proposes to carefully and logically lay out the research considerations and decisions made so that the data could be best gathered and examined in order to compare the views and opinions of the key stakeholders with each other and the existing literature.

The research question

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011), advise that a research question be kept realistic, focused, narrow, achievable and with a specific purpose. With this in mind, the general research area as mentioned above was refined to

What can the perceptions of key stakeholders of independent prep schools tell us about the current position and future viability of such schools in England?

In order to be able to answer this over-arching main question, further sub-questions are posed. These are:

- a. what is a prep school, are there benefits of prep schools and the education they provide?
- b. what are the current issues facing prep schools?
- c. what can prep schools do to ensure their place in a future educational market?

By addressing these issue from a literature perspective and from the point of view of the selected key stakeholders, it is then possible to address the main research question.

At this point it is prudent to define the “key stakeholders” as identified for this study. These have already been mentioned previously and are as follows: 1) those purchasing the product (education in a prep school) i.e. the parents of current prep school pupils, 2) the Heads of prep schools, 3) the governors involved with the running of prep schools 4) Heads of senior schools who typically receive prep school pupils and finally 5) representative bodies of prep

schools. Having identified these key stakeholders, similar information needed to be obtained from each group. The information required can be summarised as:

- Perceived benefits of the prep school (and reasons for choosing such a school).
- Perceived clients of the prep school.
- Perceived competitors of the prep school.
- Schools parents consider before making educational choices.
- Perceived attributes of the prep school pupil.
- Perceived current issues facing the prep school.
- Thoughts about the future of the prep school.

By acquiring this information, the opinions of the people who are currently supplying or buying from this market can be analysed. It is possible to explore who the purchasers of such education are, what each key stakeholder wants or feels they are delivering or receiving and whether or not these perceptions are consistent within and between different groups of stakeholders. It is also possible to explore their views on how they, the current prep school “family”, feel this type of education needs to evolve to meet the needs of a future market and whether or not the four areas initially identified by the researcher were of significance.

However, following the collection and analysis of the data gathered, it was decided that, due to the low response rate from governors and the anomalous responses from governors and the IAPS representative, their views and responses should not be included further in the research as their reliability was questionable. This will be discussed further later in this chapter.

Considered methods of research

It is important that these guiding principles are followed and appropriate care taken to ensure the legitimacy and accuracy of the research undertaken. As stated by Gomm and Woods (1993):

All educational research needs to be subjected to careful methodological assessment. Research results should never be taken at face value (pg ix)

A major misconception when carrying out research is to confuse methods with strategy (often referred to as methodology). A strategy involves a broad concept and is carried out by using one or more methods to achieve the aim.

Methodology refers to the collection of strategies employed to carry out the research and broadly speaking, can be subdivided into the pursuit of either quantitative or qualitative data. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, (2004) suggest that in the development of social and educational research, the choice has moved away from that employed by scientists of choosing either one method or another, and moved towards the decision of how to decide on what balance of the two to use. Gorard and Smith, (2006) support this idea but take it further and support a relatively new idea of “mixed methods” which proposes that studies are unlikely to be purely qualitative or quantitative but will realistically employ a degree of both. Onwuegbuzie and Leach (2005) argue that pragmatism rather than Puritanism should be applied to research through a merger of quantitative and qualitative data use. Countless arguments and counter arguments already exist with regard to various methodologies. Hammersley (1992) warns that to become engrossed in such arguments is often counter-productive to the research and seems unnecessary here from the point of view that up until relatively recently (Creswell, 2003), the only two options had been quantitative versus qualitative and therefore one argued in favour of the more appropriate choice for their particular research design. However, with the emergence of mixed methodologies Newman & Benz (1998) state this is no longer the case; “the two philosophies are neither mutually exclusive nor interchangeable...[they are] interactive places on a methodological and philosophical continuum.” (pxi). The two methods are used for their own appropriate purposes to differing degrees with each informing the appropriate

use of the other. Therefore what is a criticism of one in one type of research could be a positive in a different situation (Creswell, 2003).

In this study, the benefits of the mixed methodologies approach is acknowledged and it is argued that from the literature this type of approach can be indicated on a sliding scale moving from almost totally qualitative data with a tiny amount of supporting quantitative data, through to the other end where the reverse is true. It is this former concept which has been identified as the most appropriate for this study. A more balanced mix of the two approaches had initially been considered but given the number of respondents it was considered that predictions based on the quantitative data were not reliable or appropriate and hence a decision was reached to rely primarily on the information being afforded by the qualitative data to explore concepts in more detail in order to build a picture. The very small element of quantitative data utilised in the study was to ascertain the nature of the two markets of parents being interviewed in order to make a comparison between the two regions. At no point is this data being used to suggest that these findings can be extrapolated to define a typical prep school parent.

Cohen et al. (2011) discusses the objective (positivism) versus the subjective (anti positivism) approach. Given the human interaction required, my approach is most definitely the latter, with the view being taken that the world is far more personal and humanly created via relationships as opposed to being a natural phenomenon being external to any human effect. In addition to this, considering the dearth of literature specific to prep schools, I believe that the more exploratory approach and gathering of primary data would illicit better data for analysis. This is also appropriate given the relatively small size of the stand-alone prep school sector. Having established the view point being taken by this research, the methodologies were investigated.

When considering which form of information gathering to use, the two main qualitative research designs; case studies and ethnographies (Punch, 1998) were considered. Whilst at first inspection ethnographical research looked probable as it would enable detailed access to the different establishments involved, this was dismissed as access was not going to be gained to each establishment for any period of time, and this is deemed one of the key aspects of this type of research (Creswell, 2012). As a sole researcher, also in full time employment in the education sector it was not going to be possible to get time away from my own job and the schools I would wish to enter would also be on school holidays when I would be available to visit them.

In addition, whilst this approach would have enabled observation and informal participation within each establishment, it would not ultimately allow my specific questions to be answered and would not allow me any greater access to the identified key stakeholders. On the other hand, an educational case study is conducted into interesting aspects of educational activity, within a specific space and time so this was more appropriate in the sense that it allowed me access to the identified key stakeholders for an appropriate amount of time, it was possible to access these people at mutually convenient times and my specific research questions could be addressed. The research is conducted so as to inform judgements and decisions of practitioners or theoreticians, primarily in the natural context and within an ethic of respect for persons involved. The case study was considered the best tool to utilise for the acquisition of the desired information. Whilst there are various definitions referring to case studies, the most appropriate wordings for this particular study are two-fold: a case study is

- “a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle” (Nisbet & Watt, 1984, p72)
- a study of a “particular” (Stake, 1995).

In this instance the “particular” are independent prep schools. So the cases being explored in this study are eight chosen prep schools spread across England which take pupils from “Early Years” through to the end of Year 8. As Cohen et al. (2011) further elaborate that the case study “provides a unique example of real people in real situations” (p289), and so is

the case in this study with specific representatives of these establishments being chosen to express their views. Bassey (1999) advocates the use of case studies as a prime strategy for developing theory that enhances educational practice and Patton (2002), echoes this as he stated that a case study approach “constitutes a specific way of collecting, organising, systematic and in-depth information about each case of interest” (p447) as was the situation in my study.

Bassey (1999), states that a case study is conducted in such a way that sufficient data are collected for the researcher to be able:

- a. To explore significant features of the case.
- b. To create plausible interpretations of what is found.
- c. To test for the trustworthiness of these interpretations.
- d. To construct a worthwhile argument or story
- e. To relate the argument or story to any relevant research in literature.
- f. To convey convincingly to an audience this argument or story.
- g. To provide an audit trail by which other researchers may validate or challenge the findings or construct alternative arguments.

(p.58)

Stake (1995) summarises this in his description of a case study which he says is an examination of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances. He expands on this by saying that a case study has a boundary and contains a coherent system. Specifically, he identifies three different types of case study:

- i. Intrinsic – where the researcher wants a better understanding of a particular case.
- ii. Instrumental – which gives insight in to an issue or refines a theory

iii. Collective (multiple or comparative) – this builds on the instrumental case study by covering several cases to learn more about a phenomenon, population or general condition.

Considering Stake's (1995) classifications, this study falls into the collective case study category and after critical consideration is deemed the most suitable method of data collection for this research as Patton (2002) state, it allows "careful comparative case analysis and extrapolating [of] patterns for possible transferability and adaptation in new settings" (p41). Each case will be looked at in depth, in its own environment and its specific context and circumstances taken into account. By employing this method, direct investigation of the research questions about the position of the independent prep school can be undertaken providing coherent, clear explanations and reasoning. Previous research which has employed the multiple case study across different geographical locations in order to make comparisons is discussed at length in "Powerful Reforms with Shallow Roots" (Cuban & Usdan, 2003a); here it is school leadership under examination. In this study the researchers gathered data from documents from the past ten years which enabled them to identify six large urban school districts in which there had been a major change of governance or leadership. They then interviewed key players from these establishments involved in the reforms. Cuban & Usdan, (2003b) claim that this gave them a "snapshot of the large school districts... taken at one period in time" (p.158).

This is of a similar nature to my research in the sense that no in-depth, prolonged study, observation, and investigation of each establishment was carried out. In both the above mentioned and my study, the cases identified were the schools and key players were interviewed at a given point in time to acquire a set of data based on their experiences and views. This data went on to form the substance of the researches.

Differing from methodologies, are methods. These are the instruments used to gather the information. Different methods are suitable for different methodologies, so having decided upon the appropriate methodology for this research, consideration was given to the methods of data collection. Silverman

(2000), states that there is no such thing as predefined criteria for good or bad research methodology, there is no “one size fits all” approach. There is no prescribed method and strategy to fit given scenarios. The central task Silverman, (2006) states, is “to generate data which gives an authentic insight into people’s experiences” (p91), to reflect accurately their views and beliefs and to ensure an understanding of these. Each research question needs to be addressed individually and judgement used as to which methods and strategies are suitable. Punch (1998) warns about the limitation of methodolatry - the slavish following of specified research methods without thinking of the needs of the specific research. It is necessary to consider all of the methods available and use these as guidelines to be followed to offer insight to the most suitable combinations for the individual research. Questionnaires were given initial favour but were then considered inappropriate as the information sought would require the questionnaires to be too long. Even with open ended questions, the responses would be restricted and there would be little way of probing responses further. In addition to this response rates can be low for questionnaires (Baruch, 1999). Interviews were finally settled on and the preferred method would be face to face with all respondents as this would enable interaction between respondent and interviewer, with an exchange of views and ability to probe for more detail where necessary. Patton, (2002) argues that the interview allows an entrance into another person’s perspective. He states that thoughts, opinion, beliefs, feelings and intentions cannot be observed, and as far as this research is concerned, this is of key importance as it is the thoughts, experiences and beliefs of the interviewees which are being sought.

Considerations and generalising

It is of importance for social scientists to acknowledge the issues of generalizability. There is a great deal of conflict in the literature about this which tends to divide around the issues of sample size, the type of sampling (probability versus non probability) used and whether or not qualitative data can be used to make assumptions about a wider population (Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston & Morrell, 2003). Becker, (1998), however, comments “we can’t

study every case...every scientific enterprise tries to find out something new that will be applied to everything of a certain kind by studying a few examples, the results of the study being ... generalizable...” (p67) and social order is present in every situation therefore generalisation is possible. Whilst it is true that it is extremely difficult to study every case, these are not strong enough arguments to support generalisation per se. However, as far as this study is concerned a more viable research objective would be to adopt what was proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), namely trustworthiness and authenticity.

Guba and Lincoln’s take on the situation is that there is no such thing as a single, absolute approach to social reality. It is with this belief and understanding that it is acknowledged that the concepts and theories contained within this research are representations; there is no claim that what is contained here is the ultimate description of the social reality of the interviewees. This version, however, is strengthened by strategies proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994) i.e. through the use of thick description as well as respondent validation. Producing an account that can be considered trustworthy requires four principle elements; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These parallel equivalent criteria in quantitative research (Bryman, 2001 Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Whilst, in the case of such a small study, generalizability cannot be guaranteed, it is the endeavour of the researcher that this study will, given the limitations of time and resources of a single sole researcher, be meaningful, using qualitative methods which can be held up positively to the criteria described above. It is desirable to the researcher that the end product of this research can be used, even at an initial level, to enable prep schools to inform their direction and future and to provide groundwork for a larger, more generalisable study in the future. With this desire in mind, the emphasis is on authenticity of the respondents, validity of research methodology and transferability. (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003a), suggest “The particular value of qualitative research lies in its ability to explore issues in depth... the degree to which the data from a study support existing theories can be assessed by

comparing how well different cases fit within an established theory and how far it is able to explain behaviour in individual cases.” (p267).

Research design

Fitness for purpose has to be the overriding consideration of the research design (Cohen et al., 2011). As far as the collection of qualitative data is concerned, this will illicit wordy responses to the asking of questions in an interview situation. This data is not instantly accessible for analysis and requires processing. This needs a great deal of self-awareness by the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Having clearly established what information was being sought and the most appropriate method of collecting it for this study, the precise nature of the respondent was considered. The general nature of the respondents had always been obvious (i.e. those involved in prep school education), identifying the exact key stakeholders to be considered took further consideration and was decided upon through consultation with literature. Whilst definitions of educational stakeholders were varied (Anderson, Briggs & Burton, 2001; Friedman & Miles, 2006), there were a number of stakeholders common to all and these provided the starting point for consideration. The research question was returned to and the exact nature of what was being investigated re- considered.

In order to fairly consider views of key stakeholders, it was decided that those involved on both the provision and receiving of education should be incorporated (i.e. supplier and purchaser). It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that the specific prep school under investigation in this research is the standalone prep school (it is not attached to a particular senior school nor is part of a trust). It is also of the nature that it educates pupils from “Early Years” (Reception) to the end of Year 8 and is situated in England. This identity will be explored further a little later in this chapter. The “supplier” side of the stakeholders was broken down into several groups: Headteachers, teachers, governors, bursary team. From this, teachers and bursary team were discarded.

The bursary team were omitted because they have the sole purpose of income generation and management and are not involved in the academic side of the school. Teachers were dismissed for three main reasons; (1) many staff would not necessarily have the broader picture of education as is usually held by a Headteacher. Having risen to the position of Head, usually a number of positions within schools have already been held, giving a wider understanding of education per se; an individual will have had experience of being a classroom teacher, a head of department or pastoral role and with it, the need to support and develop that one area, and then membership of middle management having to balance the needs of several departments. Such an individual is likely to have been exposed to more external agencies and been exposed to greater professional development in a range of areas. The second reason (2) being the number of interviews which would be required but more importantly, because (3) schools tend to have individual cultures and staff are appointed by the Head teacher. It was therefore deduced that the Head's opinions and points of view would be pivotal and potentially representative of the majority of the staff.

School governors were also deemed to be key stakeholders due to their involvement in the school. They have a say in its future direction, appointment of senior staff, monitoring and evaluating success and progress, ensuring accountability and promoting the establishment. For this reason they were considered an important part of the supply side of the prep school. Having received only a 22% response rate (4 out of 20), this category could have been discarded at this stage. However, I was keen to investigate how the responses received related to those from other key stakeholders and so the decision was made to move ahead and include this stakeholder in the analysis stage of the research. Upon analysis, the views received from the Governors varied greatly from those received from the other stakeholders interviewed; their views either contradicted the other respondents, or they raised views not raised by other at all. Whilst it is acknowledged that these views may indeed be valid and may have been supported by other Governors, the lack of response and their disparateness, the decision was taken to remove them from the research at this point.

With regard to the “purchaser”, the most obvious is the person paying the school fees. It is acknowledged that this is not always the parent but for the purpose of this research, it is the parent who is deemed to be the decision maker. Issues regarding money are often sensitive and to try to ascertain who pays the school fees and use this as a sorting method was thought unrealistic. The pupils themselves as the direct consumer of the education were considered as possible respondents but then dismissed as although according to school choice literature pupils are often involved in the decision making of where they go to school, the issues being considered here were unlikely to have been known by the pupils of prep school age and it would be very difficult to locate ex pupils of the chosen schools (who would be older, have knowledge of prep schools and possibly be more aware than younger children of the issues involved with this research) without compromising ethical and data protection issues. In addition to the parents, future recruiters of prep school pupils were also key stakeholders as they are on the receiving end of the “product”. These could be employers or the senior schools to which the pupils go. For the purposes of this study, employers were dismissed as again they would be difficult to identify and issues of confidentiality would be faced. They were also considered to be too far removed in terms of the time from pupils attending prep schools and it would be difficult to account for and measure other influences on prep school pupils in the intervening years. Senior schools where pupils moved onto from their prep schools were considered a more appropriate “purchaser” as there was no time delay and their views could be a valuable contribution to the discussions of this research. The final key stakeholder identified was an organisation, the IAPS (Independent Association of Prep Schools) which is an association to which over 600 prep schools belong - approximately 582 of which are in the UK (Independent Schools Association of Prep Schools, 2014b). This was considered to be an important organisation with regard to the prep school world due to its role of being specifically prep school related, requiring certain criteria to be met in order for membership to be achieved, its training and networking facilitation for staff of prep schools and its research regarding prep schools. As with the governor category, this key stakeholder body was retained in the research until after the analysis stage but once again the anomalous nature of the responses were considered unreliable

for inclusion in the research from that point on. It was the first interview conducted and again the results differed vastly from those supplied by other stakeholders. Again, whilst the views themselves are believed to have been given in good faith, I had sufficient doubt to undermine the case for retaining them in the study. If time had allowed further interviews with other IAPs representatives would have been desirable to substantiate the views of the one interview.

Whilst it was disappointing to have to discard respondent categories, these two stakeholder classes were most certainly not as critical as those categories which remained, as they were less directly involved in the delivery and receipt of prep school education. It needs to be acknowledged here that the IAPS were very willing to be interviewed and as mentioned there is no doubt that their views were all given in good faith, it is just that they could not be corroborated in the time available and were noticeably different from the other respondents. With regard to the governors, this category of respondents were extremely difficult to make contact with in the first place as some of the Heads were not keen to involve their governors in the research, which meant I had to identify, locate and make contact with these individuals myself. Governors were identified through the school websites and then letters sent to them either via the school or via any business address which I could connect to them. Follow up letters were also sent after not receiving a reply within 4 weeks. In itself this was a highly unsatisfactory method of interacting with this particular stakeholder group and is likely to be a large part of the poor response rate. The nature of those that did respond is a matter of speculation; they could be considered self-selecting or they may want to look to be doing the right thing in helping such research. However, this is also likely to have had an impact on the type of responses they gave and is another reason for discarding them from the final stages of the research.

Now knowing what was to be discussed, how and with whom, it became a matter of establishing the population of prep schools and how specific respondents were to be chosen. The first difficulty faced was the absence of a specific list or sampling frame of the schools being considered in this research. The term “preparatory school” (prep school), covers a much wider category

of prep school being investigated is that which educates pupils from Early Years (Reception) to 13/14 years of age (end of Year 8) and which is not attached to a specific senior school or trust. The broader description not only includes this type of school, but also schools that educate pupils to only 11 years of age (end of Year 6) and in some cases to the end of year 9 or even Year 11. In addition to this it also includes schools of these age ranges that are attached to senior schools. In fact, a new free school in Northamptonshire is using the word “prep” (Ashworth Prep School) in its name which is likely to add even more confusion (Northamptonshire County Council, 2014).

The IAPS, as mentioned above, with over 650 prep school members, was the first consideration a suitable place to find a sample frame. However, they do not distinguish between types of prep school and neither are all prep schools registered with them; membership and therefore registration, is purely optional and subject to the meeting of various criteria. The next organisation considered was the Department of Education; whilst collating and disseminating numerous statistics regarding education, they do not categorise their results any further than “Independent” schools and therefore it is not possible to deduce the information required from their data either. With a comprehensive population list being impossible to establish, the initial idea of random sampling was abandoned and the methods for sampling were revisited. Sampling is often an issue for researchers but in this case, the view of Silverman (2000) is upheld, whereby he states that purposive sampling assists qualitative researchers to apply the necessary critical thinking to address generalization issues (Silverman, 2000).

With this in mind, the IAPS’ database was returned to and utilised as it claims it contains about 90% of the English prep schools as members (IAPS, 2014), being the prep schools’ official association and from my research contains the greatest number of prep schools listed in any one place. From this list, details of each prep school were sought to eliminate schools other than those that fulfilled the desired research criteria i.e. educated pupils from Early Years to the end of Year 8 and were “stand alone” (not a member of a trust and did not have an attached senior school). From personal experience of working in different

prep schools across the country, I had noticed that there were different issues facing different schools, for example, retention of girls after Year 6, parental expectations of schools, facilities available and marketing required. At this stage it was unclear to me whether these were geographical issues or specifically school related, so it was decided to make a comparison between two regions to investigate this. As a sole researcher, with time and financial limitations, the north and south comparison was (initially) further defined as Northern England compared with London.

In order to ensure as fair a comparison as possible, it was decided that the chosen schools should be matched as closely as possible in the two regions. The criteria considered were that they were to be day schools, co-educational, and fulfil the “prep school” conditions previously identified as necessary for this research. However, when specific schools were identified only four schools within the northern region were deemed suitable and this would therefore compromise the promise of anonymity and ethical considerations being adhered to in this study. For this reason, the two regions for comparison were reconsidered; the northern region was extended to contain all of England outside of London. Due to the geographic size of this area and its diversity, a final decision was made to only consider rural schools, i.e. those outside of large towns and cities. This final decision led to the two regions now being Rest of England (rural) and London (urban).

London, like most capital cities, is different from the other urban areas of a country. By their very nature, they tend to house a larger percentage of population than any other single city. London is no exception, in many ways it is even more unique than many other capital cities; it is the home of the Head of the Commonwealth, and it contains a major financial and business centre, and probably argues the most diverse population of any city (Porter, 2001; Strachan, 2013). Strachan (2013) writes that London is a “city that sets trends,

rather than merely follows them...[It] still feels like London is the fulcrum of the world – just as it was at the height of its power, when half the world was run from Westminster” (p 16). In a speech in March 2001 by Robin Cook, the then Labour Foreign Secretary it was said:

Today’s London is a perfect hub of the globe. It is home to over 30 ethnic communities of at least 10,000 residents each. In this city tonight over 300 languages will be spoken...It is an immense asset that contributes to the cultural and economic vitality of our nation. (Kerr, 2012 p.33)

London is Europe’s largest city and the sixth largest in the world, its economy is roughly the same as that of Sweden and represents more than a fifth of the total UK economy (London Councils online¹³). It will be of interest to discover that given its unique characteristics, whether London is as different with regard to its prep school education.

Four schools in each region were identified and in addition to the schools being co-educational day schools which educate pupils from Early Years to the end of Year 8 as well as being stand-alone, they were matched by one being small (less than 150 pupils), two medium (less than 400 pupils) and one large. The reasoning behind the different sizes was again for comparison purposes to consider whether or not the size of the establishment effected the views being raised by the key stakeholders. Within this final sample it has to be acknowledged that the schools were chosen through convenience sampling due to researcher finances and time and the availability of interviewees as well as through purposive sampling. Once the schools were identified the Heads were written to and appointments made with those in agreement. The interviews commenced in February 2010 after a pilot interview had been conducted to eliminate any issues with the interview schedule. It is recommended that a pilot study is carried out to eliminate any issues with miscommunication and misunderstanding (Creswell, 2012). In the case of this research, the interview questions were trialed on a small group of five people who identified two possible areas which could be misconstrued. These were

¹³ <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/who-runs-london/london-facts-and-statistics>

then altered and the new versions of the questions employed in the subsequent interviews.

Once confirmation was acquired from the prep school heads, senior schools to which these prep schools fed were then identified. Schools to which only one or two pupils had gone were generally ignored except in the place of the small prep schools. This gave a larger number of schools than desired and so convenience sampling was employed and the Head of these schools approached in the two regions. With regard to the senior schools, six were identified, three from each region; two from each region being schools with an intake at both 11 and 13 years of age with the third school in each region, taking at 13 years only. As a sole researcher this was considered a suitable amount in order to gather opinion, compare and contrast views within and between regions and be manageable, alongside the demands of the other data collection.

The most difficult part was to recruit parents as some Heads were reluctant for me to approach them. This was the case in two schools. Because of this, one school entirely was removed from the original list and substituted with another school. This was not possible in the case of the second school and so there are no parental responses from this school. For the other schools, either personal contact or through help from the school, it was possible to recruit a satisfactory number of respondents. It has to be acknowledged that the choice of respondents was not executed using any particular sampling method other than the participants willingness to respond (self-selection). This could affect their responses compared with others that were not reached. Parents may not have wanted to respond for various reasons; they may have been too embarrassed to offer their true views feeling they were not socially acceptable, they may not have felt their views would be valued, they might just have been a different, shier client. It is not possible to know what the non-voiced views were and so potential bias needs to be acknowledged. (Cohen et al. 2011). When deciding upon a suitable number of respondents it was difficult to justify a minimum or maximum number, however once it became apparent that no new ideas were being produced, at this point the decision was made that “saturation of data” would be the criteria on which the number of respondents

would be decided (Bryman, 2012). In order to be certain, a further ten interviews were carried out with the idea that should any new ideas emerged, then interviewing would continue. This was not to be the case and the final number of parental interviews concluded at 53 - 29 from London (urban), 24 from the Rest of England (rural). A breakdown of the information gathered about the respondents can be seen in Table 5.1. It is visible from this data how similarly matched the respondents in the two geographical regions were. Although this had not been specifically designed, it contributes to the desire to try to compare like with like where possible to avoid other influences being the cause of differences of opinion. There is no intent to suggest that these characteristics can be generalised and considered the nature of a “typical” prep school parent. Caution is also advised as the self-selection of the sample may have influence here.

A major difference within the respondent data was the number of two parent working families in London compared with the Rest of England (rural), with there being far more in London (urban). There are numerous reasons why this could be the case ranging from necessity to desire, however this is an area which was touched upon by respondents during interview where some expressed a need to work given the current economic climate and the cost of school fees. This is discussed further in the next chapter.

It can be seen that there were more respondents interviewed together (as partners) in the London area than in the Rest of England, this could have been due to the time of day interviews took place, with the London interviews being primarily in the evenings, whereas the Rest of England were more day time – this could be linked to the differences in employment patterns already mentioned. Alternatively it may be due to the different ethnicity of the groups.

		London	Rest of England	Total
Ethnicity:	British White	16	21	37
	Asian	8	1	9
	European	0	1	1
	Arabic	1	0	1
	Black British	0	1	1
	Black Caribbean	2	0	2
	Mediterranean	1	0	1
	Mixed	1	0	1
	Total	29	24	53
Gender of child(ren):	1 boy	2	3	5
	2 boys	5	6	11
	3 boys	2	1	3
	1 boy, 1 girl	9	9	18
	1 boy, 2 girls	3	1	4
	2 boys, 1 girl	4	1	4
	2 boys, 2 girls	1	0	1
	1 girl	0	1	1
	2 girls	2	2	4
	3 girls	1	0	1
	Total	29	24	53

Marital status:	1 parent	1	1	2
	2 original parents	26	19	45
	1 parent, 1 step parent	2	4	6
	Total	29	24	53
Length of time involved with school:				
	Less than a year	3	2	5
	More than one year, less than three	5	6	11
	More than three years, less than five	9	7	16
	More than five years, less than seven	4	3	7
	More than seven years, less than nine	6	5	11
	More than nine years	2	1	3
	Total	29	24	53
Parents at work:	One	10	17	27
	Both	19	7	26
	Total	29	24	53
Parent(s) interviewed:	Mother only	14	18	32
	Father only	5	2	7
	Both	10	4	14
	Total	29	24	53

Table 5.1 Characteristics of respondents (parents)

There was however no obvious difference between responses given by individuals compared with those given as couples.

The interview

The manner in which the interview is conducted is also of importance and can have an effect on the outcome. If carried out with care then there can be a confidence that the results are correct, worthy of trust (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Silverman, 2006). Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003) state

Creating the right rapport involves demonstrating interest and respect, being able to respond flexibly to the interviewee... Interviewees also respond positively where the interviewer displays a sense of tranquillity, an inner stillness which communicates interest and attention. Humour also has its place (p143).

The interview with parents covered the same areas as the Head teachers but also involved reflection upon the schools they considered for their child(ren)'s education. These areas can be viewed in Appendix B.

In addition to this, a range of quantitative data was gathered to analyse the characteristics of the respondents. This had initially been intended to ascertain whether a "typical" prep school parent existed, but there was insufficient data to justify this sort of statement. However, what did emerge was that there was a noticeable similarity between respondents within the two regions which had not been planned. It was also clear from this quantitative data the differences regarding working parents and ethnicity in the two regions.

There was not a huge discrepancy between the regions with regard to where the interviews took place. Table 5.2 demonstrates this information. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011) cite Skyes & Hoinville (1985) and Borg & Gall (1996) as stating that "telephone interviewing... produces comparable information to 'standard' interviews" (p441) which is something I noticed in my research too. Herzog (2005) argues that interview "location plays a role

in constructing reality... the choice of interview location who chooses and what place is chosen” is not just a technical matter of convenience and comfort. It should be examined within the social context of the study being conducted and analysed as an integral part of the interpretation of the findings” (p 25). For this reason parents were given a choice of where the interview would be conducted. If they were happy for me to go to their home, that is what I did and this was the case on the majority of occasions. However, I was aware that this may not be considered appropriate by some of the respondents given I was a stranger to them and so I suggested meeting in a public place, (for example a café), of their choice. A café was deemed a suitable place by all 16 of the respondents who did not want to meet at their home. The interviewee suggested an appropriate café and I met them there. I wanted the interviewee to feel as comfortable as possible and feel in control of the situation they were in. Given the similarities between responses from all three venues, I believe that the respondents were put at ease and the location did not have an influence on the responses given. These parental interviews, irrespective of location or whether they were on the phone or not, were more structured and required more prompting and redirecting than did those of the Heads. Where possible and in the majority of cases, these interviews were conversational and the parents were happy to give as much information as they could. In general the parental interviews progressed through the questions in the order posed by the interviewer. The themes or questions had not been pre- seen although there was an awareness that the interview was related to their experience of and views about prep schools. Interviews lasted roughly between 45 minutes and an hour and recorded through note taking which was then rewritten upon completion of the interview. This was due to the need to have a greater degree of interaction and input with the parent interviewees.

	Rest of England	London
Café	17	9
Home	2	20
Phone	5	0

Table 5. 2 Location of interviews

The parents were asked to give as much information as possible in response to each question and not feel confined to only answering the questions, if they felt there was something else relevant that could be of use. They were also asked at the end of the interviews if there was anything further they could or would like to provide that they felt could add to the research. They were also asked before the interview concluded if they were happy with the information they had provided.

The interviews with both the prep school and senior school Heads were less structured than those of the parents and topics to be covered were pre-notified to the interviewees. These interviews were entered into with the anticipation of them being more of a conversation about prep schools generally and the prep school Head's school specifically. In general the conversations were fluid and informative and the Heads needed little encouragement to talk. A little steering back on topic was needed but the conversations covered all the required areas without too much probing. Towards the end of the interviews the list of key areas to be covered was referred to and they were reiterated verbally to the interviewee to mutually agree that they had been covered. Where other areas arose which I could see as having potential, I explored these further and then included them in future interviews. Each interview took about one to one and a half hours (the prep school Heads interviews being longer than the senior school Head's); the Heads were all very willing and able to provide a wealth of information in response to my prompts.

All interviews were recorded with interviewee consent but I also took notes, although these in places were sketchy where greater engagement in the conversation itself took place. As soon as possible after interviews (and no more than 24 hours), the tapes and notes were transcribed and the recordings and original notes destroyed to preserve anonymity as promised.

Care was taken during all interviews to put the interviewees at ease, with interviews taking place on either the interviewee's territory or on neutral territory e.g local café. In the case of the Heads, prior sight was given of the topics to be discussed although not the exact questions; this was a deliberate strategy in order to give the interviewee time to consider the area of interests but without enabling them to have over-thought and pre-prepared their responses. Patton, (2002) describes this as the interview guide approach and after significant consideration of the alternatives, this method was selected so that the interview would be reasonably conversational, yet could be re-directed and answers probed should the need arise. The collection of data through this method is more methodical and systematic and provides a snapshot of perceptions about the independent prep school within each case. During the interviews (with the exception of those of the parents) a mixture of structure and flexibility were adopted (Legard et al, 2003). The key themes directed the interview yet there was sufficient flexibility to enable probing and pursuit of pertinent responses. This not only allowed more in depth clarification of responses but also enabled new ideas and themes to also be pursued. The parents' interviews tended to be more slightly more structured and tended to follow a more question and answer format yet still being open questions with room for exploration should it be required.

Due to this research being carried out by a lone researcher with financial and time restriction, this form of face to face interview was not always possible. On some occasions, due to necessity, telephone interviews were employed. Despite this, the interviews took the same format. All these forms of interview are time consuming to carry out and are very reliant on respondents' good will and compliance, so care was taken not to prolong the interviews unnecessarily in order to avoid respondent fatigue. Great awareness to avoid interviewer bias

was employed. The responses acquired from the phone respondents, were initially going to be marked as such given the known concerns with such a method of interview (e.g. greater suspicion about the interview, greater desire to present in a socially desirable manner (Holbrook et al., 2003), difficulty of reading non-verbal cues (Creswell, 2012)). However, when compared with the face to face interviews, the responses did not noticeably differ and so it was not felt necessary to make identification of these within the analysis of the data.

Analysis

The analytical aim is to ascertain the opinions of key stakeholders in the Independent prep school with regard to their views as to what it offers and what its future may be. Interview responses give access to the experience and knowledge of those currently involved with such schools.

The information gathered via the interviews were coded and then quantitatively analysed, looking at the relationships between the answers and any common elements that emerged. This was predominantly a numerical exercise and led to conclusions regarding the types of families which are currently customers of the prep schools, the main reasons for them being clients and their views. This quantitative approach did not form a major part of the analysis but allowed a feel as to proportion of respondents in the two regions. With fewer governors and heads being interviewed, the quantitative approach is even less reliable as a measure but did prove of interest if for example all but one respondent shared a view. Again, no weighting is attached to the quantity of respondents.

Unlike the analysis of quantitative data, the rules for the analysis of qualitative data are few and far between. Analytical procedures have not been standardised and the literature suggests that this might not be the right move anyway (Bryman, 2001). Miles and Huberman (1984) suggests that there are four main components when analysing qualitative data:

- Data reduction, selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming “raw data”.
- Data display, organising an assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action taking
- Conclusion drawing that involves beginning to decide what things mean,, noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations
- Verification: testing preliminary conclusions for plausibility, sturdiness and confirmability.

(p21)

The data gathered through interview is rich in information and depth and is reduced via a method of coding insuring that information is not lost. The coding enables responses to be carefully grouped and within and between comparisons to be made. Care is taken to ensure that any analysis is grounded in the data and whilst the authorial voice helps to integrate and synthesize it does not override the data (Lewis et al, 2003). Via the coding it is then possible to collate and display the data allowing for examination of connected ideas when offered as supporting evidence for conclusions that are being stated.

Each interview is examined, coded and analysed in the same method enabling comparison and contrasts to be drawn. This in turn allows for verification in a more orderly fashion. With regard to this research, parents were taken as one response group and coding is consistent throughout. This is explored in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 explores the responses of the prep school heads and this is the second of the response groups. Coding here is consistent throughout the group but may vary from the coding applied to the parental group. The remaining key stakeholders form the third response group and whilst coding is consistent again within this group, it may differ from the previous two. The coding enables responses to be carefully grouped and within and between comparisons to be made. Care is taken to ensure that any analysis is grounded in the data and whilst the authorial voice helps to integrate and synthesize it does not override the data. (Lewis et al, 2003a). Via the coding it is then possible to collate

and display the data allowing for examination of connected ideas when offered as supporting evidence for conclusions that are being stated.

A conscious decision was made to analyse the data by hand as opposed to using any computerised data analysis programme. Whilst the many advantages of the computerised versions are acknowledged (Cohen et al, 2011; Creswell, 2012), the time taken to familiarise oneself with their intricacies was considered too onerous when balanced with the positives. Further, the positives of utilising a manual system were valued. By manually handling, coding, sub-coding and “living” with the data, a greater understanding of and submersion in the data was attained. Although this was labour intensive, it enabled a far stronger sense of working with the live data as opposed to working with the results alone.

Ethical issues

It is the responsibility of every researcher to ensure they carry out their study in a nonbiased, ethical manner. This applies to the entire process: data collection, analysis and communication. The concept of ethics is summed up well by Basey (1999) when they are described as a respect for persons and their individual needs. They are a respect for the truth and a respect for democracy. The foundations for the ethical issues and ethical awareness adopted in this research were based upon those issued by the University of York in their handbook for students. Prior to interviews the interviewee’s permission was sought and granted. If those approached were not willing to participate, this was respected and alternative respondents pursued. This clearly has an impact on the final sample of respondents but the moral and ethical code could not and would not be broken.

All respondents were promised confidentiality and anonymity. At one point in the research it became clear that it was possible to identify participants from their responses. Had this been allowed to continue, it would have been in breach of the ethics code therefore some respondents, although already interviewed, were discarded and others substituted in their place. This was mentioned earlier in this chapter although in a guarded manner, again to avoid

identifying any of the original or substituted respondents. The final sample ensured that it was impossible to identify schools or individuals from this research.

Care was taken that only the desired information was gathered and interviews were carried out in person by the researcher only. Information acquired was kept securely in a locked cabinet or password protected computer within a locked house. Only the interviewer had access to this data. After processing, the data was destroyed so that the raw data could not be used for any other purpose or research. This is in line with the Data Protection Act 1998. In the analysis and write-up stages, care was taken so that the meaning attached to the data was protected and the views of the respondents were communicated accurately so as to ensure the research had accuracy and the interests of the participants were preserved in line with the wording of the informed consent forms.

Summary

This chapter has set out how and why the research was conducted in order to answer the research question. The research considered existing literature and case studies were carried out to gather views, opinions and perceptions of current key stake holders of the independent prep school.

The respondents were first identified at the level of the prep school. The initial selection was a mixture of purposive and convenience sampling. Once these were confirmed as the case studies via the agreement of the Heads to participate in the research, the governors and parents were approached. The Heads of senior schools close by were also selected and approached to participate, as was the representative body of prep schools.

All interviews were conducted on the participant's territory or on neutral ground. The interviews were generally of a balance of structure and flexibility as felt appropriate with open questions so as to gather as much information as possible whilst exploring pertinent responses yet still allowing the interviewer

to have control of the direction so as to avoid interviewee fatigue or collection of unnecessary information.

After the data was gathered, some of the information from parents was looked at briefly in a quantitative manner to obtain a profile of the parents being interviewed. This was for no other reason than to have an understanding of their make-up. The views of the parents, like those of all the other respondents, were coded, categorised and then analysed by a manual method; this chosen primarily so that a “feel” for the data could be established from the outset. The analysis of this data is set out in the following four chapters. Chapters 6 to 8 take each stakeholder group in turn and analyse their responses. Some comparison and contrast between the stakeholders’ responses between and across group take place in these chapters. Chapter 9 takes a wider view of the responses and looks at emerging themes.

Throughout the research, awareness was demonstrated of the ethical issues of the research from both a moral and legal point of view.

Chapter 6

Parents' Perceptions – Interview Responses

The purpose of this (and the next two) chapters is to contribute to the current knowledge on prep schools by presenting and discussing the perceptions of key stakeholders collected during the research. This chapter specifically deals with the views of parents. The parents of current prep school pupils were identified as one of the main stakeholders in regard to prep school education. These parents had chosen this particular type of school for their child(ren), deciding to pay for their education instead of taking a free place at their local maintained school. The views of these parents were sought in order to ascertain what had led them to their decision of type of school, what they considered to be current issues affecting this type of school and what they believed could be done to ensure such a school's future. In obtaining such information and in conjunction with the information in the following two chapters, it enables observations to be made about sustainability and direction of this type of school.

In total fifty three parents of current prep school pupils from two geographical regions: Greater London (29 respondents) and the Rest of England (rural) (24 respondents) were interviewed for this study and will be discussed in this chapter. Chapter 7 will look at responses from current prep school heads in the same two geographical regions and Chapter 8 will look at the final stakeholders; senior school Heads, again, for the same two geographical regions.

Patton (2002) states that fine qualitative analysis remains rare and difficult. This is very much acknowledged at the outset of this analysis and caution will be taken to register any limitations as the analysis is undertaken. The aim is to contribute to the greater understanding of the prep school and its key stakeholders so that more informed and guided decisions can be made in the future than is currently possible. The findings from this analysis will enable conclusions to be made and inform further research into this area.

The questions below were put to fifty three sets of parents of current prep school pupils. Whilst following a semi structured model, these questions were open and intended as “trigger” questions from which the conversation then flowed. If the parents were going too far off the topic or had misinterpreted the question, I steered them back whilst trying not to influence their comments.

- What do you consider to be the benefits of a prep school which educates pupils through to the end of Year 8 (age 13/14)?
- Why did you chose this **type** of school?
- Why did you chose the **specific** school you did?
- Who do you think are the clients of these prep schools? Is there a specific type of client? Does your school’s client fit this description?
- What schools are competitors to the prep schools?
- Which type of schools did you consider before making your choice of education?
- What, in your view, does the prep school pupil have over and above others? (if anything)!
- What, in your view, are the current issues facing this type of school?
- What is, in your view, the future for this type of school?

The findings presented in this chapter are grouped by theme; this enables ease of comparison to be made between the responses and when links are made with responses from other stakeholders in subsequent chapters. Where the data is referred to, it is given as a fraction e.g. if seven respondents from Greater London gave a reply, this is referred to as 7/29 in the text, as there were twenty nine total respondents from Greater London. Specific quotes are assigned to their owner using the reference system outlined in Appendix C.

Respondents were not limited to a single response to questions, as during discussion, several themes were explored, therefore totals will not always add to fifty three. It also needs to be noted that for some of the questions, a category may contain several related themes which were combined in the coding of the research data. If a respondent expressed more than one theme within a category, it is only recorded as a single response to the category itself.

This chapter identifies that quantitatively the two geographical regions were very similar in their parental characteristics although does not presume to claim that this is anyway can be seen as representing a “typical client”. It merely means that comparisons were being made between similar groups made up through coincidence more than design. The analysis also identified that there was a second market noticeable within the London region i.e. a largely Asian market. In addition to this a further distinction within the overall market was identifiable; this being the reasons behind the choice of a prep school. This distinction included most of the aforementioned Asian market within London, and also included non-Asian members from both geographical regions and amounted to the choice of prep school being made from a “future proofing” mentality i.e. parents had identified key careers that were desirable for their offspring and were working backwards through desirable educational establishments to ensure said careers were achieved. All of the reasons given by the parents in this research for choosing prep schools were in line with reasons listed in the existing literature (Coldron et al., 1991; Fox, 1985; OECD, 1994). However, I identified a market segment of parents who were future proofing their child’s life and this did not appear in any of the literature consulted. This market segment consisted of the vast majority of the Asian cohort interviewed and also many of the first time buyers within the sample.

Also emerging from this research is a change in the nature of the clientele; with a shift noticeable from the traditional independent school parent to ‘first time buyers’. A regional difference was evident in the schools considered as competitors to the prep school with the London market primarily only considering other prep schools whereas the Rest of England considered the broader independent schools market place. Of interest is the way in which

parents stated certain types of schools as competitors but did not consider all of these when making their own choice of school.

Prep school pupils were considered by parents to be more confident, mature and academically able than children of a similar age having gone through a different form of schooling and the benefits perceived across the two regions were similar. There was also similarity with the views as to the issues faced by prep schools and methods by which to overcome these. Two of the original four identified threats to prep schools were mentioned by the parents; the economy and issues associated with becoming coeducational. Other issues which had not been previously identified were also raised; some of which were region specific and one (a change of age range) which could fundamentally alter the nature of the prep school.

Parental Responses

Overall 53 sets of parents were interviewed (29 from Greater London, 24 from the Rest of England (rural), a breakdown of their characteristics can be seen in Table 5.1 in the previous chapter. When looking at the information gathered e.g. ethnicity, number of children, working/ non-working parents etc, the characteristics of these parents across the two regions, with the exception of ethnicity, were similar and were achieved through luck and not designed but has enabled a comparison between two similar groups of clientele as opposed to those of disparate characteristics. The process of selecting the respondents and their demographics was discussed in the previous chapter.

Benefits of prep schools (that go to thirteen years of age)

The first question in the parental interviews referred to the perceived benefits of the prep school and parental reasons for choosing such an establishment, both in general terms and specifically. On the whole, the perceived benefits were also the reason for choosing the school. There were only three

respondents who gave extra reasons for their choosing preps. Two respondents stated that they were either independent or prep school pupils themselves and wanted the same for their children. The other respondent wanted a “better” education for their child than they had received in a maintained school and their perception was that the prep school would do this by giving fewer distractions during lessons thus enabling a better grasp of topics being taught. They had considered all independent education within daily commutable distance from home but had decided upon the prep school.

The responses to this question were allocated to one of six categories which had been determined inductively through the analysis of the raw data. The six categories in descending order of popularity (when all 53 respondents are considered) were “Environment”, “Opportunities whilst at school”, “Opportunities for the future”, “Discipline”, and finally, “After school care”. This order was reflected in the Rest of England (rural), whilst Greater London had the first and second categories transposed. Within the “Environment” grouping, parents mentioned the facilities available to pupils, the quality of the teaching staff (which was perceived to be better than that on offer in the maintained sector), and the subject specialists available to younger pupils, the smaller class sizes enabling staff to better know and help each individual child. There was also a belief expressed in both regions, that prep schools provided a “more fun and friendly” environment.

The whole feel of the prep school is professional, productive and oozes “excellence” but it is also caring and above all the children are happy; it is fun. (PL3/3)

A further phrase that appeared frequently was that children were “more nurtured” than they would be elsewhere. When explored further this was explained as pupils being more cared for generally and also being in the unusual position of being “protected” (in the words of a couple of parents) until they were 13 years old. This meant that pupils could develop away from the influences of older children and be allowed to develop their own personalities, in a safe environment, allowing them to mature and gain confidence whilst being the eldest in the school as opposed to being the

youngest as would be the case in the secondary school environment. The perception was that older children could be intimidating (whether deliberately or not) to younger children and therefore restrict growth of confidence.

The “Opportunities at School” category contained a range of responses many of which were closely linked to the “Environment” section just mentioned. Looking at these in more depth, parents liked the fact that sports play a large part in the life of pupils at a prep school.

The sport is part and parcel of prep school life. The children are taught to love sport, they have a diverse range of opportunities available to them, and they compete at a high standard and are encouraged to live a healthy life style (PL3/7).

In addition to this, parents commented on the greater number of hours dedicated to sport within the prep school and praised the benefits that come from sport, not just the physical benefits but the behavioural, emotional and life skills benefits too.

Playing team sport teaches you so much about yourself, it teaches good sportsmanship, team work, consideration of others and gives great camaraderie (PR2/1).

This view is consistent with much of the literature (Hanson, 2012; Uttley, 2012) about the benefits of sport on young people and also is something many of the Heads commented on about being a strength of the prep school.

Parents enjoyed the children being educated in the classics and modern languages, having access to proper laboratories for science lessons from a young age, having art and technology lessons often from specialist teachers and still having a high quality of academic lessons too. They also liked the number of hobbies and extra curricula activities available for the children. In addition to this the ability to pursue musical instruments in school, the strength of drama and the performing arts in such establishments and the chance to go on school trips were also regularly mentioned. All of these are areas often promoted in a school’s literature and on their websites.

Continuing with comments that were made under the “Opportunities at School” category, there was “the encouragement of reading which lasts a lifetime” which the respondent qualified by saying that

when talking with friends who had children at local maintained schools, reading did not appear to be valued nearly as much as it is our school. We have really appreciated all the different ways our children have been encouraged, but not forced, to read and for the advice we have been offered about one of our children who is a reluctant reader (PL1/7).

This is a very specific comment made by one particular respondent, however five others, referred to reading and how a love of this is key to a love of learning and praised their schools on how it had been taught. This is not to say that this would not be offered in a similar way in any other school, it is simply being highlighted as having been specifically raised by parents in this research.

In the “Opportunities for the Future” category, parents talked about enabling their children a greater opportunity to get into well-known senior schools and hence a better chance of entering universities such as “Oxbridge, Exeter, Bristol or Durham” which in turn would afford them better career prospects. This was a view expressed primarily in the Greater London area and primarily, by Asian parents. A few parents admitted that their choice of a prep school was made as children would be mixing with likeminded people and families and would not be negatively influenced by the “wrong type”. This was explained as children who misbehaved and disrupted the class, children who swore and used “bad words” and children who just did not know how to behave properly. In the words of one family

Children today are exposed enough to bad language and behaviour on television without having it all day long at school. We want our children to know right from wrong and know the correct way to behave from the wrong way. We don’t want them learning bad language and thinking that using it is okay. We want them to be able to get on and learn in class not have their time wasted whilst waiting when others are being told off. (PR4/5)

In other words, the children would be surrounded by ‘good examples’ and would know how to behave appropriately as they grew older. Others took this further by saying that the networking potential for future life would be

“founded in the dorms of the prep school” where friends would be made for life and they wanted this chance for their child, this was however, only two or three parents from each region but all were parents of at least one boy. It is impossible to say how many may have actually been thinking this but did not say. It is not surprising that these were views that were expressed as the media regularly talks about the success of privately educated school pupils, particularly boys and also of the “old boys’ network” where positions are awarded on one’s college tie. This is supported by the literature with it being reported that in 1987 nearly 50% of MPs in Britain were privately educated (Walford, 1990) and The Sutton Trust (2012) reporting that the education of the nation’s leading people were from Independent schools.

Another important comment made was the benefit of the schools offering before and after school care and hobbies which enabled parents to work long hours and not to worry about child care. Each of the respondents who gave this as a reaction were quick to add that this was not their only reason for choosing a prep school but it certainly helped and that without such an opportunity they would not have been able to put their child through the prep school as they needed to work to pay the fees. This was more apparent in the London markets.

The opportunities for after school care are a God send and they are all on site so we don’t have to pick the children up and take them elsewhere which we wouldn’t be able to do anyway. Without this facility we could not work to afford the fees. What is better still is they are not just held in a babysitting service. The children have the chance to experience hobbies they would not otherwise have had the chance to do, they get their homework done and they have some “down time”. When we get home we can spend a little time as a family before bed (PL2/6).

Two further respondents who commented on after school care spoke of their desire to keep their children in a school their children enjoyed and with which they as parents were very happy. In order to do this, both parents now needed to work but the parents were prepared to pursue this path as they valued the education being provided. Another respondent’s views were

We liked everything about our local prep school and it came across as offering far more than the other options, we knew it would mean sacrifices for us to afford the fees and luckily I managed to get back into work as otherwise we would not have managed it. But with both of us now working, collecting our child is tricky but the after school clubs remove this worry (PR4/3).

I suspect that this is far more of the case in the recent economic climate than it would have been previously although this was not volunteered by the respondents and to avoid leading questions, this was not asked either. Wolf, (2013) suggests that a situation where both parents are working is becoming a far more regular occurrence and particularly amongst the middle-class professional/managerial parents. It is therefore not necessarily just in response to the economic situation but as a result of women becoming more equal to men and career driven. This would suggest that this after school care is likely to be increasingly sought and advantageous if it could be found at school.

Prep school clients

The second question posed to parents concerned their views on who they thought the prep school's client was. This question yielded six groups once the responses had been analysed. These were categorised, in decreasing order, as "Anyone who values the best education", "Middle, Upper class and/or professional parents" "Those who are prepared to pay and can manage to", "Those who were independently educated" "Those wanting an holistic education" and "Disappointment with Maintained sector". The regional breakdown revealed the same order to their results and as with the combined totals, the first three categories clearly outnumbered the last three, with the leading category being commented on by 33 of the 53 respondents. These categories represent quite a diverse set of perceptions by the parents and tends to support the literature which suggests that the purchaser of private education are indeed a diverse group (Gorard, 1997).

"Anyone who values the best education" may appear a contentious title, but was arrived at after consideration of the data gathered and phraseology utilised

by parents themselves. Parents referred to excellence of teaching, breadth of subjects taught (i.e. the inclusion of classics), the facilities on offer as well as referring to the success rate of pupils leaving such schools in terms of scholarships won to senior schools, the type of senior schools the children went on to, the universities they attended and the careers they had. In this particular section, this was commented on equally by parents of boys and girls. The parents felt that all this encompassed what the prep school parent was buying into and wanting for their children.

People like us. We want our children to have the best. The world is a tough place and only getting tougher. There is no telling what competition for jobs will be like by the time our children are looking. We want to give them a head start and know we have done everything we can to help them out. Education is something that can't be taken away from them. The prep school offers a child so much (PL4/4).

The second most commented on category, "Middle, upper class and/or professional" highlighted an interesting concept. For many years, prep schools marketed themselves as educators of gentry and nobility, this has not been the case for decades, yet there is still that perception amongst some. Interestingly, however, only one respondent mentioned "upper class" specifically.

The others spoke of "hard working, middle class people" or "professionals", so it appears that the elitist perception has been eroded. However, many of the respondents also referred to "like us" so care needs to be taken with these views as people do not always accurately categorise themselves for a number of reasons. It must also be remembered that the sample were parents currently in prep schools and were associating with the clients about whom they were commenting. A completely different perception may be held by people on the outside.

About half the respondents who talked about clients being those who valued the best possible education, added the caveat "so long as they could afford it". By this they were not referring solely to those with sufficient disposable income. A comment that was coming through very clearly was the perception that many of the parents were making huge sacrifices in order to afford such

an education. Only a couple of parents were prepared to admit their own sacrifices but many gave anecdotal information about friends and what they had heard in the playground.

One parent was commenting on how, in order to afford the school fees, they had forgone holidays for the past 3 years and didn't know when they would manage another, whilst another sympathised with her and said that they were embarrassed turning up in their old car and dreaded each MOT as it was on its last legs but they just couldn't afford to replace it. On three evenings a week I have a friend's child home with my two as she works evenings for extra money. She already has a day job (PR2/7).

Whether or not this was indeed observed conversations or was the situation for the respondent but were too afraid to say, I suspect that given the protracted economic problems, similar stories hold true in many households but pride stopped such stories emerging.

The next category "Independently educated parents" was commented on by the Head of prep schools as being of great annoyance. They spoke about having worked hard to dispel the myth of prep schools only being for those that have been privately educated themselves (see comments from Heads in the next chapter). Given that so few parents actually mentioned this as a description of the typical prep school client, perhaps the prep Heads have had some success with dispelling this view, although this sample is of people who are already within the system. Those who did state this as a category had no specific common factors i.e. they were not all from independent education themselves, nor were they all from state education. The responses came from both geographical locations. Had parents who were considering prep schools been questioned, a different response may well have been elicited.

Conversations that were grouped into this category ("Those wanting an holistic education") addressed issues such as the breadth of education on offer. This category differs from the first in that the respondents did not mention "excellence" or "best", their comments simply revolved around the range of activities and education open to the pupils of prep schools compared with other

establishments. This breadth is an aspect that the majority of prep schools focus on in their advertising literature and although only mentioned by seven respondents, it is still of appeal to clients and prep schools should feel reassured that is an area of marketing worth pursuing.

The final grouping for responses to this question was “Disappointment with Maintained sector”, although not possible to prove within the scope of this research, it is worth consideration that this could have been brought to the forefront of the interviewees’ minds given the nature of Government policy under Michael Gove and Lord Adonis in recent years. One parent from Greater London said he had been state educated and wanted better for his children. He chose prep in preference to Junior/Senior split, purely for the geographical location but was adamant his children would be Independent educated.

When questioned about their meaning of wanting “better”, he explained

I feel I could have performed better at school but was too easily distracted in lessons and was not been pushed enough to perform well and go to university. I drifted around after school and managed to turn myself around later on by getting a degree through correspondence. I do not want the same for my children and I believed that Independent education is where I will find what I did not have. Having gone round different schools when searching for our current school, I have not been disappointed (PL1/3).

Five other respondents gave their view that people disillusioned with the local State schools would buy into the Independent sector. When questioned further two admitted this was only supposition and not a comment made because they knew people who fitted this category. The others said that they knew of people who had left the Maintained sector for a number of reasons; large class sizes, class disruption, poor SATs results and finally that they had not got into either of their first two choices of secondary school.

Prep school competitors

Question three asked parents about the types of schools they considered to be the competitors to a prep school. Again six distinct categories emerged and again the order was the same in the two regions, the only difference being that the Rest of England (urban) were tied on the second and third category. The categories are, in decreasing popularity: “Independent schools”, “Only other preps”, “Good state schools”, “Any school of corresponding year group”, “International schools”, “No competition”.

Although not unexpected, it is interesting to see that it is primarily only Independent schools, whatever their nature, that are considered to be competitors of the prep school. However, it must be borne in mind that the respondents in this section are parents who have bought into the Independent sector and this could well be affecting this answer (excluded are those who did not even consider Independent education and those who considered it but then rejected it). To be taken note of also is the concept that people tend to give higher value or worth to what they have chosen or been forced to choose, so this could also have an impact upon responses given (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

It is also of interest that “Good state schools” (a term used by the respondents) were considered equally in both regions as potential competition. This has implications for the London prep schools as they not only have a higher density of Independent and prep schools as competition, they also have parents considering “Good state schools” too, as much as they would elsewhere in the country. The crux of the matter for the prep schools will be the number of such state schools deemed to be “good” in existence in their catchment area. By “good”, parents referred to the number of A and A* results at GCSE and the number of A to C grades obtained at A level, as well as the reputation the school had for behaviour management. These were the criteria in the minds of parents as to whether they would buy into a secondary school at Year 7 (and make junior school decisions based on that, or whether they wanted to pursue the private education route and consider two or three tier options).

This question prompted a response I had not even considered, that being “International schools” i.e. schools overseas that teach the English syllabus through English language. Three Greater London interviewees gave this response. There were two reasons given for the inclusion of this; one being that the population needs to be far more mobile due to the job market and that therefore the stability of boarding should be a consideration, and so international schools are just as viable as English schools when considering educating a child. The second reason given was that International schools have an advantage over British schools in that they offer a child the opportunity to become multi-lingual.

With the nuclear family no longer existing and people having to be far more willing to travel for their work, the International school offers stability to a child with the added advantages of often being a British education system in a foreign country and teaching languages to a far higher level and the pupils being able to practice the language in the environment around them (PL3/5).

It is interesting to note that given that both these reasons are valid for considering such establishments, not a single respondent in the rest of England voiced this as a potential competitor. It is possible that this type of school was only mentioned by London respondents due to the more transient and cosmopolitan nature of London; a greater interaction of cultures and more travelled people (Ackroyd, 2012). It could be said they are more a member of the global city and considering international schools is no different to them than considering a school in one’s own city. Alternatively it may be that within London there are also International Schools and so those living in this region are more aware of their existence.

Parental choice of schools

Question four was more specific with regard to competition and asked which other schools the parents themselves consider prior to making their choice for their child. The categories here were, in descending order of popularity

nationally, “only other prep schools”, “Independent schools”, “state schools”, “all the schools in the area”, “No other school”. There were differences between the two regions however with their preference order.

It is evident that the Greater London clientele were far more predisposed to choosing a prep school, perhaps, this is due to the number of such establishments available for consideration compared with the rest of England. However, in both regions considered, over half of parents had already decided to consider only Independent education for their child. This is supported by literature which comments on the independent market containing a percentage of parents who are specifically committed to only purchasing private education (West, 1994). This is interesting considering the responses in the previous question where Independent education was not identified quite so clearly as being the only competitors of preps. In that question, there was a far greater consideration of “Good state schools” (respondents’ words) also being in contention. Perhaps parents perceived “good” state schools were not in existence in the particular areas of the “Rest of England” surveyed as this respondent suggested “In our area the state schools are really very poor. I would have certainly considered state schools had that been a viable option where we live” or parents had not made a distinction between “good” or “bad” state schools, but simply considered them as state schools. It is worth considering an American study that indicated two US states; Michigan and Arizona, lost 6% of their student enrolment in the private sector to their emerging Charter Schools (Walberg, 2007). These Charter Schools are very similar to the new free schools which are developing in England, so if these succeed are likely to fall into the “good” state school category and be deemed as not only competition but also fall within the realm of schools also considered by potential prep school clients.

With those who considered no other school, there were a couple of reasons given. One was that the parent had been to the specific prep school and wanted their child to go there too; another was the geographical location was convenient. The final answer given by three sets of parents was that through conversations with friends and colleagues, the decision had been pretty much a foregone conclusion as the other schools they may have considered had been

gradually ruled out one by one through these conversations. They then visited the school that was left through default and liked it.

Further examination of these results compared with the results to the last question prove interesting reading as there was not always a match between parental perception of prep school competitors and those schools considered when making their own choices:

- Greater London, 13 respondents stated that they believed the only competitors of prep schools were other prep schools, yet 17 respondents considered only other prep schools.
- Rest of England, six respondents stated that they believed the only competitors of prep schools were other prep schools, yet seven respondents themselves considered only other prep schools when making their choice.
- Greater London, 13 parents considered “good state schools” or “any school” to be a prep school’s competitor, yet only 5 respondents themselves considered state or all schools in their area.
- In the Rest of the Country, only seven parents themselves considered “good State schools” or “any school”, despite ten of them describing these as competition.
- No parent even considered an International school for their child(ren).

A particularly interesting result is that of the respondent who believed there were no direct competitors to the prep school yet they considered every school in their area. This does not seem quite so anomalous when the reason is considered.

There is no direct competition to the prep school. Each school has its own strengths and weaknesses and so should be considered as one would an individual person (PL2/6).

However it does suggest that the respondent may have been confused between the word competitor and comparator which would explain such a response.

Given the literature regarding school choice, and reasons for specific schools being chosen, it is worth mentioning that according to Gilbert, (1991) there was consideration to the distance the school was from home. "...parents will select one as near as possible to their own front door; a choice particularly pertinent for the parent who has to drive the child to school." (p. xi) and Fox's findings that proximity was a high motivator (Fox, 1995). It appears that in this study, at least, parents were prepared to travel to what they considered to be "the right school".

Benefits of the prep school pupil

When asked what qualities parents thought that pupils in a prep school that goes to 13 possess when they leave, over and above other pupils of the same age, the responses fell into eight categories (in descending order of national preference): "Confidence/ maturity", "Diversity of experience", "Greater academic knowledge", "Ability to study/independence", "Better behaviour/morals", "Leadership", "Adaptability", "Better fit with school at 13". This national pattern was not reflected exactly in either of the regions with Greater London having the second and third category inverted, whereas the Rest of England (rural) saw the third and fourth category inverted. Considering the small number of respondents involved though, this is of no great significance.

The benefit with the highest number of responses in both regions was "Confidence and maturity", parents elaborated in a couple of ways exemplified by the following statements:

Pupils have developed a confidence in themselves and have learnt how to communicate. This in itself builds more confidence (PR2/4).

From the parents of a boy and a girl,

Boys mature more slowly than girls and by having those extra two years, they can take the benefits of maturity and gain far more from their experiences of being the top year group in a school and this boosts their confidence (PL4/3).

Pupils are far more confident, they have had the opportunity to develop their own personalities and be comfortable with whom they are as their childhood has been more sheltered and devoid of undesirable influence (PR3/4).

The “undesirable influences” mentioned here referred to disruptive children in class and exposure to those who drink and/or do drugs. They felt that their children would be exposed to “real life” soon enough and that protecting them from such influences until they were more able to cope with it was beneficial to their development. They believed that such negative influences were possible in other types of school whether they be Independent or in the Maintained sector. Their key issues was that secondary schools contained children from eleven to eighteen years of age and that this was too broad an age range. They explained that if their children were more chronologically mature and had greater confidence in themselves and knew who they were, (by being separated from the older pupils for longer) they would be better equipped to say “no” and make informed decisions once they moved on at Year 9.

As far as the Rest of England is concerned, a close second was the “Diversity of Experience” acquired by the pupils in their time in the prep school. Here diversity of experience refers to the range of opportunities academically, sporting and socially available to the children and is unlike the works by Brown, Reay and Vincent (2013) and Taylor (2012) which look at for example, diversity of ethnicity, class, sexuality, supply of education, nature of student. Parents felt that this was far superior to the opportunities available to pupils of similar ages in other schools. Whilst this was not in second place as far as Greater London was concerned, those who did express this as a view, offered similar explanations.

Pupils in younger years have far more options available to them than they would in a school that only went to 11. For example they have the opportunity of specialist teachers, specialist facilities. The children in

the top two years continue to benefit from all of this but they have the added advantage of being the top in the school, getting main parts in plays, being chosen for teams etc which they would not experience as the “babies” in their senior schools (PL3/2).

There are far more opportunities available to children in prep schools due to the age range and quite often the smaller number of children involved compared with the large senior schools. There are more academic trips, more social activities (hobbies and trips away), music, drama and sporting activities and better chances of being able to be involved (PR3/1).

Greater London prized “greater academic knowledge” as their second highest benefit of a prep school. The Rest of England had this in joint third place. This is perhaps not surprising when the population mix is taken into consideration with London being far more multicultural than the rest of England when considered as a whole. This is reflected in the sample for this research too. All but one of the thirteen non-white respondents to this research in the Greater London area mentioned “greater academic knowledge” in their response. Typical responses are:

This type of school has a good learning environment. The children have excellent teachers with specialist knowledge who know how to get the best out of the children. The classes are small and children are taught to learn. They cover a wide range of subjects in depth so have a very good start to their senior life. They all do well and get into their senior schools of choice often with scholarships (PL2/4).

The least favoured of the benefits but present in respondents from both the Greater London and the Rest of England, was the view that pupils were in a better position to be fitted to a better senior school. This view was explained by both respondents in identical ways. They felt that by the age of 13 a pupil was far more formed as a character, had pretty much decided what they enjoyed and did not enjoy in school life and staff had a better grasp on the pupil’s nature too, so that as a team, it was easier to decide upon the best senior school for the pupil. From a prep school’s perspective it is perhaps a little alarming that this was mentioned by so few respondents. Many prep schools specifically mention this benefit in their literature and for it to be valued by so few could have implication for the sustainability of the top two years in the prep school.

Issues facing prep schools

Next the parents were asked what they considered to be the issues facing the prep school at present. Their responses can be summarised in eleven categories with the most commented upon being the current economic climate. The others were “Good local 11+ education”, “changing legislation”, “concern over pressures at 13+ exams”, “senior schools taking at 11”, “school management”, “none”, “Immigration and changing clientele”, “lack of demand for traditional values”, “one stop shop convenience”, “perceptions of “privilege and elitism”.

When reviewed the key areas raised were the economy, retention of girls at 11, examination pressures, good local competition, and peace of mind of the “one stop shop” education from 3 to 18 years in one place. These reflected a couple of the issues which had initiated this research but introduced several others worthy of further exploration.

With regard to the economic climate, one respondent who did not cite this as an issue facing prep schools, specifically ruled it out by saying that parents would sacrifice nearly everything else (holidays, new cars etc) to ensure they could pay the school fees and therefore felt that the economy itself was not a threat. This could suggest that there may be a “core” of parents who will opt for the prep school no matter what, whilst others may be less committed. Conversely, one of the respondents who cited this as being an issue, explained that the prolonged depression of the economy could now become a threat due to its duration. He felt that whilst parents would do everything they could to avoid removing children from school, it was now likely to become more difficult to avoid this. Whilst in the early days parents would have made sacrifices (such as cars and holidays as mentioned by the other respondent), now the choices were becoming starker more along the lines of mortgage or education. He felt that times were becoming tougher and this would be having a bearing on family choices. Another of the respondents expressed concern that the smaller prep schools were particularly under threat. They felt that the

economy would not only hit parents fee paying capabilities, but for the smaller schools who were perhaps just coping, the prolonged recessions coupled with the inflation could cause smaller schools to have to shed staff, cut back or close entirely.

Coupled with this and the issue of the “just coping” schools, is the opinion expressed by some parents that:

Given the protracted nature of the current economic position, we have spoken with other parents about the future of our prep school (it is one of the small ones) and we have made the decision to remove our youngest son this year. He is just finishing Year 6 so it is a convenient break although not what we had bought in to and certainly not what our older two sons did – they both went all the way through to year 8. We have made this decision on two counts the first being we do not want to be in the position of the school closing and us having to, at the last minute, find alternative education. At least this way we have made informed decisions. The second concern was the class size. I have always thought that the smaller class size in prep schools is a great benefit, but five pupils was taking it too far! (PL1/4).

When asked if he knew of others making similar decisions, his response was “yes, people are anxious. We pay a great deal of money to these schools and you read about it all the time in the press about schools closing, parents do not want to have that possibility hanging over them.”

Whilst comments such as these (about concern, not necessarily actually removing their children) were only expressed by six parents, spread equally between the regions, these parents each referred to conversations they had had with their friends about similar concerns. This is a very difficult scenario for the smaller prep school as the removal of only a few children could prove to be fatal.

The majority of reasons were given by only a small number of respondents in each case, however these need explaining nevertheless as there are noteworthy aspects of these results. The provision of good 11+ education was considered more of a threat in the Rest of England than it was in Greater London, with the Rest of England citing “good state schools”, (mainly, but not exclusively Grammar Schools) as competition as well as local Independent

provision. This is supported by the answer to “Which schools did you actually consider prior to making your choice?” with seven out of the twenty four respondents considering State Schools (compared with five out of twenty nine in Greater London). However, this contrasts with the responses received to “Who do you consider to be the competitors of prep schools?” with only six out of twenty four in the Rest of England naming a “good state schools” whereas nine out of twenty nine did in Greater London.

When the Greater London respondents were asked to elaborate on their comments that “Good local 11+ education” was a threat to the prep school, only one of the three mentioned Grammar Schools, yet all three respondents mentioned other independent schools, in their many forms. From this too arose a discussion, not mentioned by the Rest of England, about girls leaving at 11 to go to senior schools. This raised interesting points because some parents did not know why the girls left at 11, but felt it was “just what happened” and their daughter had left last year with all of the girls in her class. Others were more informed and explained

Girls can stay if they want but it is not as easy to get into a secondary school at 13 as it is at 11. I wouldn't want to risk it and anyway everyone else would have had two years together so breaking into friendship groups would be difficult. I couldn't do that to my daughter. If they stay in the prep school they are in the minority so that is not great either (PL4/2).

So to clarify, the Rest of England were considering both the maintained sector and Independent sector as a threat, whereas the Greater London area were looking at the different type of independent schools. As the number of respondents is so low, it is not really possible to draw any real conclusions. Similarly with the disagreement of answers obtained from question 3 and 6, consistency has to be questioned unless the respondents have a particular distinction between “threat” and “competition” which was not picked up at interview.

The third category to this question, “changing legislation”, encompassed a variety of responses. Parents (two from the Rest of England and one from Greater London) were expressing concern about the government proposals that

pupils from the maintained sector would be given priority to the top universities. They were surmising that parents would perhaps invest in independent education to 11, give children a good start and then put them into the maintained sector.

Two parents, one from each of the regions chosen, spoke of the newly introduced university fees and felt that this additional cost could put a burden on many of the families that would have been on the border line of being able to afford school fees in the first place. They expressed the opinion that parents in a financially weaker position would be likely to decide to save for university instead of paying school fees earlier on.

In addition to this, there were comments about the emergence of new types of schools within the maintained sector, e.g. free schools and academies. Parents felt that the free schools in particular were a potential threat as they were self-regulatory and would attract a more “desirable clientele” (“a child of parents who want their children to succeed and who take an interest in their development”) than the typical state school therefore making them possibly a free version of a private school, but each of the three respondents who stated this type of school said that they would reserve judgement as they were such a new phenomenon.

Three parents from the Greater London area, and notably from one school alone, mentioned the ever earlier examinations for senior schools at 13. This is a London phenomenon whereby many of the London schools no longer use the Independent Schools Examination Board (ISEB) 13+ Common Entrance examination as the method of testing for entry to their school. This examination had originally been designed for such a purpose and for a long time the majority of schools used this externally-produced tool which was taken by pupils in May/June. However over the past ten or so years, more and more of the London schools have decided to write their own examinations in-house, each school sets its own examination date which has become increasingly earlier. Teaching still continues after this time but parents felt that much of the work that was covered was project based and whilst it may be interesting, they were questioning the robustness of the work and whether

it was a waste of money. They were questioning whether it would have been better to move their child at 11 and not have such a hiatus in learning in Year 8. They were therefore questioning other parents decisions based on their own experience. This predicament was not raised by any other respondents.

“Concern over pressures at 13+ exams” whilst registered as a potential threat in both regions, was more prevalent in the Greater London respondents. The reasoning was that the pressure put on children was increasing year on year and they felt this was not right. Of the respondents who mentioned this, two suggested that parents would consider moving their children at 11 and hence cited this as a potential threat as others may be of the same opinion. The other two respondents (one from each of the geographical regions) mentioned the appeal of the “One stop shop” whereby examination was eliminated until that of the public examinations as children were put into a school at 4 years of age and remained until they left at 18. They felt that this would reduce the pressure on the children and families as a whole. This is not necessarily the case as many schools, although they do go “all the way through”, do still examine at either eleven or thirteen, and whilst the majority of pupils do “get through”, it is not a foregone conclusion.

The respondents who highlighted “Immigration and changing clientele” as an issue were purely from the Greater London region. The perceived threat here was the increasing number of “foreign” customers being attracted to the prep schools. One respondent said that they knew of friends who had left their school because the clientele was nearly 75% Asian and that is not what they had wanted. They believed a prep school should be British (white). The other respondent from the same school said exactly the same but they themselves were Asian! The first respondent went on to say, again anecdotally that they had other friends whose children were in school with so many other cultures who had English as a second language that lessons were being affected as the pace had to be slowed down so that all pupils could understand. This is a difficult issue for the prep school to address and is not a prep school specific issue. It is not surprising that this is an issue addressed by the Greater London respondent as London is a cosmopolitan city where diversity is embraced (Strackan, 2013).

Finally the category “Senior schools taking at 11” needs a little further explanation so as to distinguish it from “Good local 11+ education”. The former category refers to schools changing the age range of pupils which they currently recruit. Many of the traditional public schools take pupils only from the age of 13 years and so prep schools are serving a purpose of educating children to 13 and then supplying these senior schools with able children. There are also many senior schools which, whilst either having their own “tied” prep school or beginning themselves at Year 7 (pupils being 11 years), have a second intake at 13 years (Year 9), again being no threat to prep schools. Although, at the time of writing, there is one particular London school whose Headmaster is changing and the incoming Head has made it very clear that the school will no longer consider the 13+ entrance to be as important as the 11+ entrance. He wants pupils from 11 years and the old “gentleman’s agreement” of leaving them in their prep school until 13 years old will no longer stand. It is this type of threat to which this category refers; this and the likes of Harrow and Eton etc., beginning to take at 11 years of age. Whilst not many parents identified this as an issue in response to this question, a great number of respondents commented on this in their response to “What is the future for this type of school?”

When asked if they believed the prep school had a future, comments such as “Yes, so long as senior schools continue to take at 13” were made. It is interesting that this was the only specific comment made about their future given the number of threats that were identified. As well as the economic climate and issues associated with being coeducational being identified by the parents as threats, they also identified the emergence of new maintained sector competition, and particularly in London raised concerns over the 13+ examinations. These they found to be stressful and were unsatisfied with what they considered to be wasted time post examinations. In addition to this, although misinformed, there was concern expressed about the cost of university now that fees were payable and the rumours that maintained sector pupils would be given priority to top universities. Although not true, misconceptions can still have a negative impact on a market place as they are perceived to be a truth and then circulated as such. The final issue raised as a

threat was the ethnic balance within schools; in the eyes of some parents there is a thin line between multi-cultural and too multi-cultural. This is not an easy judgement for a school to make as admission on the basis of race is illegal and as mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3 a school does need to earn sufficient money to reinvest in order to survive. Making a decision as to the ethnic balance of pupils within the school is in direct conflict on both of these issues, however failing to do so could risk alienating some existing clients or potential new ones.

In addition to the threats, there were a number of areas which were suggested as a means to overcoming the threats or to exploring opportunities. These are discussed in the next section.

The future of the prep school

Just over half of all respondents felt that the prep school had a future, although many qualified their answer by making suggestions as to how they could go about this! Their views and thoughts were enlightening and will be discussed below. It is worth commenting that no respondent gave an outright “no” as an answer although 3/29 (Greater London) and 4/24 (Rest of England) did say very specifically “not in its current format”. So, although appearing to offer opposite answers (i.e. yes versus no), the respondents nearly all said that changes were necessary.

Responses fell into eleven categories with “Increase marketing” being the forerunner in both regions. This was followed by “Find a Specialism (USP)”, with “Fees” being mentioned in third place. “Drop to 11 years” and “Merge” came in a very close fourth and fifth place respectively. “Reinstate Scholarships” and “Continue to offer excellence in all” were each mentioned by one respondent in each region (Four different people in total). The remaining categories were region specific with Greater London respondents mentioning “Be more communicative with parents”, “Be more community generous” and “Make better use of post exam time”. The Rest of England had five of its respondents suggest “going to 16”.

With regard to “increase marketing”, respondents in both regions felt that their Prep schools seldom marketed their product in the way businesses do. Many referred to the companies they or their spouse worked for and made a less than favourable comparison with regard to marketing. They felt there was much room for improvement with regard to this and that there were untapped markets available. Of these respondents, three in the Rest of England and seven in the Greater London area combined this suggestion with finding a USP or a specialism.

It would not harm any prep school, but the small ones in particular would benefit from finding something different. This would be good practice anyway, but the new Academies are all supporting particular areas of specialism. Preps could do the same but still provide above average in the other areas too. USPs are always beneficial in business and schools need to compete like a business (PL2/7).

There were various expressions of altering the age range of the prep school. The rest of England proposed increasing the age to 16 years, this had 5/24 of respondents suggesting this, whereas no such suggestion was made by respondents in Greater London. The other option was to drop the top two years and reduce to 11 years of age. Again, this carried far more support from the Rest of England than from the Greater London area (5/24 compared with 1/29). Generally speaking, an alteration of age range was not suggested by the Greater London region. However, if this is the path followed by prep schools, they will fundamentally alter what they are about and what it is that people have been saying that they have been buying into. Their uniqueness will be compromised and a different product created. As is the case with some schools that have already gone down this route, many of whom form the “Sixteen Group” schools which have been discussed in the Literature part of this research. Merging with other preps was also a suggestion.

It is going to be touch and go for the smaller schools. The larger schools will be okay. Merging or arranging to share facilities, resources etc may be a win/ win solution, whether this be with other preps or with local senior schools (PR2/3).

Either of the solutions suggested by this respondent would enable the prep school uniqueness to be preserved but would offer better economies of scale for

those involved. However, merging would not necessarily be an easy options as USPs of the individual schools would need to be considered and their compatibility debated.

Interestingly a response raised from both regions, albeit by only one respondent in each case, was a reinstating of “the scholarship system”. When questions parents were not sure if they were thinking of the old Assisted Places scheme or not. They were just aware that they knew schools used to give “free places” or a reduction in fees. From speaking with the schools involved, this had never been removed. Whilst on the face of it, it may appear that giving subsidised places may not be in the interest of the prep school, it needs to be remembered that it is one way of fulfilling requirements of the Charities Act 2006 and could also attract additional revenue if one sibling is subsidised, yet another pays full fees.

Many of the other response can perhaps be justified as school specific issues, but the 6/29 and 5/24 (Greater London/ Rest of England) response rate suggesting a reduction in fees, freeze of fees or fee deal needs to be explored further.

It would be beneficial to both school and families if schools offer packages as far as fees are concerned. E.g. pay full fees for the first child and reduction for siblings (PR3/6).

Keep fees fixed until the recession is through (PL1/1).

Whilst many Heads may have sympathy with the last view, it is unrealistic as, at the end of the day, schools need to operate in a business-like manner. Increased costs all round are being levied on the school through utilities, catering, and general operational expenses, so an increase in fees is inevitable, however, the winners are likely to be the more empathetic, caring schools who realise how hard it is for their clients and who work with them by only increasing fees to cover their own increased expenditure.

Summary

The responses of fifty three sets of parents interviewed for this research have highlighted some key areas of interest. Whilst it is apparent that some of the views about prep schools in general are in reality specific to the individual prep school in question, it is the bigger picture that is being sought here and there are many of the responses which are applicable to several if not all of the prep schools involved in this research. The parental responses have highlighted many themes, some of which are region specific, others which are applicable to both of the regions investigated. In general, there was a high degree of agreement between the two regions.

Statistically, from this set of data, a “typical” prep school client emerged as being married (to their original partner), white British with two children. Their involvement with the school was between three and five years. Of notable difference between the regions was the number of Asian respondents in Greater London, however this is to be expected, given the nature and diversity of the Greater London population. In addition to this was the difference in the number of both parents working. Greater London having a far larger percentage of these. Discussion suggests that in both geographical regions, there was a need by many to work in order to pay for the school fees, again this was felt more greatly in the Greater London area. This could be the case for several reasons; school fees are generally higher in Greater London than in the Rest of England (rural) and the cost of living and housing is also higher (Office for National Statistics, 2014). There may also be an element of there being more job availability in Greater London therefore enabling the second parent to work.

From a parental perspective the prep school client was deemed to be someone wanting the “best education” for their child(ren) and willing and able to pay for it, through one means or another. Some respondents went as far as classing these clients as upper or middle class, professional parents. Geographically there was no difference in the order of the number of respondents holding these beliefs, therefore it appears that there may well be a market which is the same nationwide, yet London has an extra, second market to appeal to.

The key areas perceived to be the benefits of a prep school were opportunities both whilst at school and for future life and the environment in which the pupils become absorbed. The former being favoured by Greater London and the latter favoured by the Rest of England. Prep schools are in a unique position of being able to offer senior school type facilities to younger pupils and this is very much valued by the prep school client.

A wide range of responses were given when parents were asked which type of schools they considered to be competitors of prep schools, even to the extent that International Schools were considered as competition by three Greater London respondents. The responses here suggested two differing markets with regard to competition, however, when actually making their own choices, the establishments considered were notably narrower in type than those identified as competition. The Greater London parent primarily considered only other prep schools whereas the Rest of England considered other preps and Independent schools equally. This may well be to do with the number of prep schools around. London is far more densely populated with such schools where as the Rest of England is not, perhaps causing parents to look at alternatives.

The top two criteria which the respondents perceived to be held by pupils who leave prep schools at 13 are confidence/maturity and a diversity of experiences. The Greater London respondents added to this a greater academic knowledge. It is worth considering the lesser held beliefs given by parents to this question. These being “an ability to study/independence”, “Better behaviour and morals”, “Leadership”, “adaptability” and “a better fit with their senior school at 13”. By the very fact that people have stated these as benefits, it is worth prep schools highlighting them as they are likely to be benefits that appeal to others too. A number of Heads talked about some of these being benefits that they feel a prep school offers, but it appears these need to be stressed more so as to alert current and potential customers.

When asked to consider the issues facing the prep school, both regions were again in agreement and stated the economy as its biggest current threat. With regard to other issues identified, the two regions had the same second and third

choices although these were in reverse order, they nevertheless created the same top three responses. These second and third reasons were competition from “good local 11+ schools” (in the case of the Rest of England, this constituted local Maintained schools, whereas in the Greater London area, it was mainly local Independent schools which were being considered). From the earlier question pertaining to school choice, it is interesting to note that Greater London respondents primarily (although not exclusively) only considered other preps possibly due to the availability in the geographical location but their lack of consideration of other establishments is worthy of further investigation. The issues identified by the parents as being issues facing the prep school will be compared with views of other key stakeholders in the following two chapters.

In response to the final question, there was once again an agreement between the two regions. They felt that improvement in marketing was key to the development and success of the prep school moving forward. In conjunction with this was the suggestion that a USP be sought and developed. These were the clear lead ideas from the Greater London respondents. The Rest of England respondents in addition, raised the ideas of altering the age range of the prep school; either raising it to 16 or cutting it to 11 years old in line with a two tier system which is prevalent in this country. As discussed this would fundamentally change the prep school as described in Chapter 2 and it would no longer have its unique features. Merger on the other hand, as suggested by Greater London respondents, preserves this distinct product.

Chapter 9 draws together the bigger picture which has emerged from the views and perceptions of all of the key stakeholders, but for now this chapter concludes with the broader messages being received from the information gathered from parents alone. It appears that whilst there seems to be much similarity between the two regions there are some areas which do not sit comfortably with each other. There appear to be two different types of reasons emerging for parents buying into the prep school market and they don't necessarily work well together. There are, on the one hand, a body of parents who are looking for a holistic education wanting experiences, nurturing, sport,

fun and a balanced curriculum. On the other hand, there are a body of parents who are looking for academic excellence to gain a place at a chosen senior school as part of a predetermined pathway for their child(ren). These are primarily made up of two types of clientele; most but not all of the Asian, London market and the emerging, first time buyer (although not all of these were pursuing this type of education). If the school can also enable the pupil to excel at sport or music to provide them with an extra “edge” for success, then better still but this was not the key element. Whilst all of the reasons for choice of school given in this research agrees with views expressed in other studies (Coldron et al., 1991; Fox, 1985; OECD, 1994; West, 1994;), an acknowledgement that there may be two distinct markets has not emerged in literature. This is likely to be the case because the literature has applied to education in general or to independent schools, as opposed to prep schools *per se*. With prep schools being fee paying, a market therefore exists and the clientele are the customers; trying to satisfy these two markets is not necessarily going to be an easy situation to solve as there is a potential of alienating one.

Not only has this paradox in the market emerged, so too have a number of issues perceived as being of threat to the prep school. Two of these, the economic climate and schools becoming co-educational, had been identified from the outset of the research, a number of others were identified by the parents. It is unlikely that any one of these alone would cause the prep school’s demise, however when taken together, a slow decline could be possible unless addressed in time.

Whilst this chapter has only analysed the views of the parents it appears at face value that what they are prizing in a prep school comes at a cost and given the current economic climate, it is not just the customer who is suffering financially, so too are the schools. It is clear from the views here that parents are working extremely hard to avoid having to give up private education for their children and because of this have become even more discerning, choosy and active as a customer. This could potentially create a situation well-known marketing phenomenon whereby at some point in the near future a critical point will be met with customers’ (parents) demands on suppliers (prep

schools) out balancing what the school is able to provide due to external pressures from other directions, for example, financial pressures from increased supplier costs (Porter, 2008).

This chapter has considered and analysed the ideas of parents of prep school pupils. The next chapter will consider the views of selected prep school Heads. These will then be compared with the results of this chapter.

Chapter 7

The Views of Prep School Heads

The purpose of this research is to investigate the prep school market in the views of the key stakeholders and use their perceptions to investigate what the future for these establishments may be. The previous chapter explored the views of present prep school parents; this chapter looks at the views of prep school Heads. It is important to consider the views of prep school Heads for a number of reasons. First, they currently lead their own individual school and are responsible for creating and delivering what it offers. Secondly, collectively, these Heads act as a body, influencing and directing the way forward for this section of the Independent schools market. It is of value to investigate whether their views of what they offer and to whom they offer it, match the perceptions of their clients. If a mismatch is identified, this in itself has implications for either an individual school or this type of school *en masse*. If there are common themes, are these sustainable and/or correctable in a mutually convenient manner?

The two geographical divisions remain the same; London and the rest of England (rural). There were nine respondents in total; four from Greater London and five from the rest of England (rural). The interviews with the prep school Heads used similar, appropriate, but not identical, questions as prompts to those used with the parents. These were:

- What do you think are the benefits of a prep school that goes to the end of Year 8 in general? How about your school specifically?
- Who do you consider to be the clients of this type of prep school?
- What, in your view, are prep schools' competitors?
- What, in your view, does this type of prep school pupil have over and above others?
- What are, in your view, the current issues facing this type of school?

- What is, in your view, the future for this type of school?

However, unlike with the parental interviews, these questions tended not to be answered sequentially due to the Heads' passion to discuss this type of school and the amount of information they were willing to communicate. Nevertheless, the presentation of information in this chapter will follow the order of the questions above although there will be areas of cross over and cross referencing.

When categorising the prep school Head's responses, there was far less diversity of answer and therefore fewer categories emerged than had done so with the parents. This could be due to the fact there were far fewer respondents than there were to the parental questionnaires or that the prep school Heads' views were more homogenous - the reasons for which can only be speculated upon.

What follows is a discussion which highlights very few geographical differences between the two regions but does emphasise the difference between parental views and Heads' views. With regard to the geographical differences, these were: the Greater London Heads' failed to mention the breadth of education received with regards what is special about a pupil who attended a prep school which took pupils to the end of Year 8; their expressing concern over the 13+ examinations both in terms of syllabus and timings of the exams; and their feelings that retention of girls at 11 was problematic and it was not becoming co-educational *per se*. In both regions there was a lack of mention of the quality of education provided and the benefits of such an education for the future, indicating a lack of awareness of what was being sought by parents. Neither was their mention of the opportunities afforded whilst at school. Further evidence of a difference in views between the parents and the Heads of prep school was what was considered competition with the two-tier independent sector not being mentioned as such. Whilst it must be acknowledged that in itself the absence of expected replies or the existence of unexpected replies should not be given weight, it is raised here and discussed in this chapter in relation to the marketing literature discussed in Chapter 3. The literature discusses the need for suppliers to be aware of the needs of the purchaser. In this case, the differences of views expressed by Heads and parents could be partly due to the

acknowledgement of lack of business acumen by the prep school Heads (this has been discussed in previous chapters and will be returned to again in Chapter 9) – I suggest that had they been more business savvy, they would be more in touch with their clientele’s views and vocalising more similar views.

Prep school heads’ responses

The words “Client”, “clientele”, “customer” are used interchangeably and are my own words (unless appearing in the quotations). It is acknowledged that these are rather business oriented but reflect the tenor of the conversations I had with the Heads during interview.

Benefits of prep schools

Prominent amongst the Heads’ responses were “Confidence, maturity and Independence” and “Environment”, with eight of the nine Heads stating these. Then came “Opportunities” and finally “Resilience” (mentioned by only a Greater London respondent). All Heads in the Rest of England actually raised all these points, whereas each category was only mentioned by three of the Heads in Greater London (not the same three in each).

The “confidence, maturity and independence” category was created from the Heads’ comments which discussed the benefits of the final two years of the prep school which goes to the end of Year 8. They felt children, particularly boys, were not sufficiently emotionally nor cognitively developed to move onto the, less nurturing, realms of senior schools. Whilst literature (Miller, 2011) supports that cognitive development is indeed occurring during the period of eight to twelve years old and that stability during this time is of benefit, there is no apparent evidence that senior schools are necessarily less nurturing than prep schools. Such a philosophy is likely to be school specific and difficult to substantiate through literature.

In addition to simply having the familiarity of surroundings and people, the pupils have the chance to develop their skills, confidence and independence

through a staged programme of transition from a class based/ Form Teacher style set up, to the senior school style of visiting several different classrooms. Coming with this is attached the need for a high degree of organisation which requires practice and help. The Heads argue that this is much better done gradually and with support as opposed to an abrupt change as experienced in the junior/ senior split of the two tier system. The nature of how this was actually achieved within the prep schools questioned, varied somewhat. Some kept the Form teacher class based approach until the end of year 6, others Year 5 and yet another, only until the end of Year 4. The Heads did say that it was a regular debate as to when actually was the best time. A couple of the schools had deployed specialist staff to the pupils' classrooms as an interim step (instead of the children going to the teacher's room), yet another, had the specialist teacher come to the children's classroom and escort them to the teaching room, but this was at a cost to curriculum teaching time.

It could be argued that if the prep schools are teaching these skills to children of this age, then it could be done elsewhere too. However, as has been discussed already in this research, other schools do not have the luxury of specialist staff and facilities to enable such independence to be taught and practiced.

The Heads also commented on maturity and physical development. They explained that at the end of Year 6, with very occasional exceptions, the pupils are still very childlike in beliefs and outlook but as they progress through years 7 and 8 that they begin to turn into young men and women. Two Heads, both from the "Rest of the England" felt this journey was best taken in the familiar surrounds and in familiar company, rather than coping with puberty in a new environment, whilst getting to know new pupils and staff. Another comment relating to puberty, was that with this often comes the "flexing of muscles" and that the testing of and learning boundaries was also best done in familiar surroundings.

With regards to confidence, it was explained that with maturity and independence came greater understanding of oneself and this gave way to greater confidence.

Children can be children and develop at their own speed, by the time they reach the end of Year 8, nearly all, if not all pupils have developed confidence in themselves and can move on in a positive way (PR3).

In addition it was believed that greater confidence was fostered through the opportunities available to the prep school pupil and through the environment (both of which are discussed below.)

When referring to the “Environment”, the Heads mentioned many of the same aspects as commented on by the parents. Heads of the smaller prep schools questioned pointed out that one of their benefits was their size and that “parents have bought into us due to the smallness of the establishment. They were looking for compact and familiar.” Equally however, some of the larger prep schools were keen to claim that they too had been bought into because they were so much smaller than many secondary schools. They did not mention that this would only benefit the top two years of pupils and that in fact they were a fair size larger than many junior schools. The Heads of the larger schools did however also mention that small class sizes (twenty or fewer pupils) schools enabled greater pastoral care and nurturing of the children although, I believe there would be many two-tier Independent schools which could compete with these class sizes and also claim excellent pastoral care.

Another element addressed by the Heads which echoed parental views was the lack of negative influences by older pupils. In the words of one Head:

It is one thing having your thirteen year old being influenced by teachers and other thirteen year olds. It is very different having a thirteen year old influence by a fifteen year old (PL2).

However it could be also argued that a thirteen year old influencing a nine year old is equally undesirable, or even alternatively, both could be considered a positive influence. Although, due to logistics (timetabling, the size of play grounds, dining rooms) and stricter supervision of younger children, it is less likely the case that a thirteen year old would come into contact with a nine year

old as all prep schools involved in this research and others of which I am aware tend to have separate sections to their schools e.g. lower/ middle/ upper whereby there is very restricted contact between them.

Opportunities in prep schools were strongly emphasized by the seven respondents who commented on them. It is of surprise however, that these were not mentioned by all. Again, the opportunities raised, very much mirrored those expressed by the parents. So much so, that it raises the question as to whether the parents were relaying the sales pitch presented to them by the Head or were they real benefits that they had noticed. The benefits identified by the seven Heads were the schools' facilities and the chance for the younger students to use these (see the argument in the previous chapter about this unique aspect of the prep school). The breadth of the curriculum and the inclusion of the Classics (Latin and /or Greek) were held up as very much positives due to their scholarly nature, influence on an understanding of civilisation and their ability to help with the learning of other languages. Two Heads also rejoiced in the fact that their curriculum was not tied tightly to the National Curriculum; they did admit some restriction in the top three years due to Common Entrance expectations, but were pleased that lower down, there was greater flexibility. I would suggest however, that such flexibility would also be the case in any independent school.

Drama was mentioned specifically by several of the Heads who held a similar view to the one expressed here:

Drama is one area that we excel in. Any pupil who wants to be involved, can be involved. The slightly more reluctant are encouraged. Pupils like this would be lost to drama in a senior school and even those who love it may not get the chance to participate in lower forms (PR2).

It is interesting that several Heads felt that "they excelled in Drama", each thinking they had a USP, only to be matched by many others, although geographically not in competition. Sport was another area mentioned on numerous occasions. The Heads went to great pains to reinforce how much sport was "part and parcel" of the prep school, the experiences being invaluable in building confidence, discipline and team spirit as well as teaching pupils about healthy life styles. This argument about the benefits of sport is

certainly backed up in the literature (Hanson, 2012; Riddoch, 1998; Uttley, 2012). Generally speaking, a greater percentage of time is devoted to sport in prep schools for children of that age than in any other type of school in England.

Another USP, identified by many of the respondents were the opportunities given for travel:

We offer specific trips abroad to our Year 7 and 8s after their exams; these are great experiences and wouldn't be available in a senior school (PR4)

Expeditions week is a key area we offer to all our pupils from Year 3 up. They experience a variety of opportunities building on key skills year on year (PL4)

The Heads explained various opportunities of this nature that were afforded to their children which developed a variety of skills and gave them chances to try many new activities, increasing their confidence and giving them greater experiences to discuss and draw upon. Many of these took place during term time and were compulsory. It is this element which differs from many other schools, where activities of a similar nature may have been offered but they were only for those who wanted. By making it compulsory, even the more reluctant get the chance to try something different, in turn, increasing their confidence.

Finally worthy of mention within this section on opportunities are the Leadership opportunities which several Heads felt their older pupils benefited from and which helped their growth in confidence during Years 7 and 8. Again they were keen to stress that pupils of this age in the two tier system would not be privy to such chances. This was another area which parents agreed upon.

“Resilience” was only mentioned by one respondent and could possibly have been categorised with the “maturity, confidence, independence” category, however, I felt it was worthy of comment on its own, particularly as the pressures of preparation for the examination had been highlighted by parents in the “Threats to Prep Schools” section discussed in the previous chapter. This comment specifically related to the sitting of Common Entrance exams at 13+.

Whilst many parents fret at the pressures of the 13+ entrance exam, we have to work hard to boost its importance whilst play down the stress. Life has pressure and the pupil who has learnt to deal with such pressures and examinations at this stage in life will go on to be better equipped for the future (PL3)

The Head went on to explain that it was a matter of not only educating and helping the pupils with these pressures in as gentle a way as possible, but it was as much about managing parental concerns and expectations.

This analysis has revealed that whilst there are many areas of commonality between parents and Heads of preps with regards to the perceived benefits of prep schools, there are also notable differences. Many of the comments regarding the “Environment” and “Opportunities” whilst at school were the same, however, it is of interest that not a single prep school Head mentioned anything about opportunities for the future, yet this was certainly a perception of many of the parents, particularly the Asian parents and to a lesser extent, the first time buyers. Discipline was not explicitly expressed as a benefit of the prep school by Heads although it came across implicitly in conversation. Not surprisingly, the Heads did not see the Out of Hours care as a particular benefit of the prep school as this is not their main line of business and does not benefit them as such, although is of a huge help to working parents. The biggest surprise however, is that not a single head commented on the quality of their academic education in itself. They referred to “specialist staff” and “wonderful facilities”, yet there was no reference to excellence or quality of the education. It is difficult to know why this would be the case. Perhaps there was a certain assumption that it was a foregone conclusion and it was the “other bits” which were important? Perhaps they feel that the standard of education is no different from anywhere else and the differences are those “other bits”, or perhaps they have become complacent and/or forgetful of their main product and reason for being i.e. an academic education. Whilst parents still continue to perceive that a good academic education is being delivered, then this omission by Heads is only a faux pas, however, in the long term, it is certainly worth prep schools taking this on board when formulating how they celebrate and advertise their school’s existence.

Prep school clients

In contrast to the parental views, a “typical” prep school client did not emerge from the questioning of Heads. However, five categories were identified from the thoughts of the Heads. These were “Professional parents”, “those looking for smaller classes or environment”, “First time Buyers”, “Those that can afford it” and “Privately educated parents”.

The first category, were suggested by only two Greater London Heads, yet four from the Rest of England. Whether this is an actual reflection of their own clientele, or not, is unclear. It could conceivably be that they felt that was who they should say was their customer. Perhaps, it was those who didn’t give this reply who were loath to “label” their customers in any way.

Of the Heads who commented on a client’s desire for smaller class size or environment, three of the four were from the Rest of England and do reflect the smaller schools from this research. The Heads who mentioned this said that it was explicit comments from numerous parents, when looking round the school, which made them consider this to be a characteristic of their clientele.

They [the parents] often ask about class sizes and numbers in the year group etc. Many say that it is the smaller environment which they are interested in. They think it is more personal and not so daunting (PR2).

First time buyers was a distinction specifically made by one of the Greater London Heads when comparing a shift in customer away from the “Privately educated parent”. He felt that the former type of customer was perhaps on the decline whereas the first time buyer was on the increase in his experience. He found that this latter category of customer had done their research and was very specific as to what they were looking for, although this did vary from customer to customer. This was endorsed by a Rest of England Head who, whilst not comparing the First time buyer with any other category, did talk about parents new to Independent education who were looking to help their children in any way they could. He said that this type of parent came very prepared with specific questions on Open Days and the majority (of parents) having bought into the school were very anxious for a couple of terms until they got used to the system. Herewith, lies a further consideration for the prep school to take

heed of and perhaps ensure a smoother, more mentored passage for parents new to prep school education.

“Those that can afford” it was commented on in a flippant way by both respondents. They both admitted that fees were not cheap and they were aware of the sacrifices being made by many families in order to send their children to such schools. This ties up with the comments of parents in their responses. However, they did go on to say, that there were actually several pupils in the school on bursaries and the school had supported families in difficult times for many years. It appears from the discussion with most of the Heads interviewed that bursaries had been awarded for very many years which meant that they were already fulfilling the criteria as raised in the 2006 Charities Act (discussed in Chapter 4) . This also dismisses the comments made by parents in the previous chapter that a way forward for the prep school was to re-introduce bursaries. It may be that prep schools need to make more people aware that this is an option

A final suggestion given as to whom the prep school client may be, was by one respondent who mentioned “Privately educated parents”. As mentioned above, one other Head stated this as there being a shift away from this type of client. This is interesting as three of the other respondents specifically said that the typical prep school parent was *not* a privately educated parent themselves necessarily. They were commenting that they felt this was the traditionally-held view which did prep schools no favours and they had been working hard to dispel that myth in their local areas. As commented on in the previous chapter, this seems to have been working although it appears there is still room for greater effort, given that a Head is claiming that to be a typical client, or maybe he is just in an old fashioned catchment area.

It is interesting that the Heads of the school where there was a high Asian contingent, (which was commented on by parents), did not mention this. It is possible that they did not consider their parents and pupils by their ethnicity, that they did not want to categorise their parents in such a way, or that because I did not ask about their prep school specifically, but preps generally, they were considering a larger population than just their own school.

Prep school competitors

Without exception, all the Heads interviewed considered other prep schools to be their main competitors and the majority considered “good” state schools also. By good, they meant those that enabled students to achieve A and A* GCSE results and A to C grades at A Level. These were not restricted to just senior schools. The Heads were also considering junior schools that laid good foundations for such results to be achieved later on. They explained that it was this type of result that parents sought. This corresponds with the information being given by parents in the last chapter.

What appears to be an emerging concern, particularly in the Rest of England, is that of the one stop shop – the school that takes the pupil in at four years old, from which they then emerge at 18 years old (again a threat which had been mentioned by some parents). The Heads who commented on this type of school were very critical of it as they explained that being in one school for 14 years was not a healthy option and certainly did not echo real life.

At no point in life will one any longer find themselves in the same job or situation for a prolonged length of time. The world is all about movement and short contracts, there is no longer the concept of a job for life, so why put a child into a situation whereby they stay with the same group of people for such a prolonged amount of time? This is a false situation. The children don't learn to cope with movement, making new friends and adjustment (PR2).

How robust this argument is though, I am uncertain. It could be argued that there is much to be said for stability and familiarity during the years of development and learning. Indeed this is what prep schools argue with regard to their Years 7 and 8. By keeping a child in one school, does not mean they are locked in single classroom with the same group of children for the entire fourteen years. These schools often have more than one class per year group and the children will be mixed around. Similarly once, GCSE and A Level options are chosen, the children will be mixing with different groups for

different lessons anyway. Being with a limited number of people is likely to teach tolerance and acceptance, skills useful for later life.

A more vigorous argument though is that the choice of school made by a parent for their four year old may not be appropriate for their 14 year old...

You go to a Quaker, non-competitive school at three and you have spawned the next Laurence Dallaglio [former captain of the England rugby team]. By eleven, he will be banging on the door wanting to play rugby four times a week, but have no opportunity to do so. Equally, put a child into an academic school who is into face painting and origami and again, it is not right for them (PR2).

However, this is not insurmountable and movement to other schools is always possible, even if not the original plan.

Free schools were mentioned by only one respondent in each of the regions but this could have been due solely to the timing of the interviews. The two respondents were the last two to be interviewed in a process that was rather protracted over a three year period and free schools were in the very early stages of conception at the time of the earlier interviews.

the free schools are offering great education, free from the control of the local authority with less disruption, from what I can gather. These schools, if they continue in the way they have started could be a real threat in the future, especially drawing those parents who are affording the private sector by the skin of their teeth (PL2).

It is impossible to comment on the views of parents from this study as their interviews were carried out earlier although from talking to parents at my school, they were of mixed opinions and felt it was too early to really know how free schools would succeed but thought the concept was a great idea. However, the main reservation was that they followed the two tier age range and the parents felt the children would miss out on the opportunities afforded in Year 7 and 8.

One of these respondents also mentioned the “no frills” schools such as the GEM group. The ‘alternative’ private schools such as the GEMS and free

schools certainly appear to be taking pupils from both the private and state sector and filling the gap between the two.

This is a group run by a Dubai based company Global Education Management Systems (GEMS) who have bought up schools which were struggling financially and then put their own mark on them. This mark is private education at a cheaper price. The senior director of GEMS, John Bridger described it in the following terms:

The analogy is the plane flying to New York. Some passengers have extra food and bigger seats, but there is no compromise on safety and everybody gets to the same destination. Similarly, whatever the model of school you can be sure of the same first class standards within the classroom.

(Ward, 2004)

At the time of writing there are currently only six of this type of school in the country (GEMS, 2014), compared with the 120 they had hoped for by 2009 (Ward, 2004).

This type of school was not specifically mentioned by any parent although it is unlikely that they would have made the subtle distinction between this type of independent school and any other. However, what is of particular note is that with the exception of the one respondent who mentioned the new GEMS schools, the two tier independent sector was not mentioned by any Head as being a threat. I can only suspect this was an oversight, although an oversight by all nine respondents is surprising. It was evident from the Rest of England parents' views that the independent sector in all its forms was considered the primary competitor of preps.

From this it seems as though there is a clear inconsistency between the views of the client and the provider within the market. Whilst the prep school (from a Head's perspective) is aware of the possibility of new entrants into the market, it does not seem that they are aware of the existing competition in all its forms. Porter's Five Forces (as discussed in Chapter 3) emphasises a need to be fully aware of all competition due the impact it could have on one's business if

ignored (Porter, 1980). As mentioned perhaps it was an oversight by all Heads that other Independent schools were not mentioned, or perhaps this is only a recent change and as there is, as West, (1994) suggests, “comparatively little research ...on parents’ reasons for choosing private as opposed to state education for their children” (p.115) this is difficult to substantiate. However, whatever the past reasons, with the emergence of the first time buyer of private education and their information gathering characteristics, an awareness of the full market of competitors would be advantageous.

Prep school pupils

The responses here fell into five categories with the last being mentioned by only one respondent who was from Greater London. “Confidence, maturity and independence” was followed jointly (nationally) by “Love of Learning and an ability to learn” and “a broader educational base”, followed by “resilience” and then “a desire to contribute back to the school”. It can be seen that these closely resemble the responses to the “Benefits of prep schools” discussed above. In order to avoid repetition, only the additional views will be discussed in this section.

...pupils enjoy what they are doing. They are given a wealth of opportunities to pique their interests which inspires many to pursue them to a much higher level in further life (PL3).

This “love of learning and an ability to learn” was also picked up on by the parents in the previous chapter when they were discussing the “fun” nature of their chosen school and yet the Heads whilst offering it as a strength of a prep school pupil, did not consider it to be a benefit of a prep school education. It is suggested that this might need some consideration as it could be used to their advantage when attracting potential customers.

Finally was the response referring to a prep school pupil having a desire to contribute back to the school. This was interesting because the Head referred to traits of loyalty, kindness, sharing of skills and of being a good role model, however I couldn’t help but get the feeling this was a more to do with helping the school survive in a financial sense, although this was never specifically

mentioned. If that is the case it is supported in the literature where the use of alumni as a promotional strategy is advocated (Mazzarol, 1998), it might be worth pursuing it further.

The three notable omissions compared with the parental responses are better “behaviour/morals”, “adaptability” and a “better fit with their 13+” school. Perhaps the first two of these were implicit in the “Confidence, maturity and independence” category and just not as strongly highlighted by the Heads as by the parents. Similarly, the latter, was perhaps hinted at when reference was made to the unsuitability of the one stop shop, although, again, one would have expected more than one head to have thought this worthy of comment, and certainly food for thought when marketing the benefits of being a prep school pupil taking pupils to the end of Year 8.

Issues facing prep schools

Just as was suggested by the parents in this study, the greatest “current issue” facing the prep school was considered to be the economy, with eight of the nine respondents commenting on this. However, unlike the parental responses, the Heads only named two other concerns; “senior schools taking at 11” and “senior school exams” – a concern of Greater London exclusively.

There were expressions of concern at the number of prep schools closing or merging given the current economic climate. They expressed empathy with the Heads of these schools saying that it had not been an easy ride for the Independent sector.

To be honest, we did not worry in the beginning. Historically it takes time for prep schools to be hit in a recession. We can normally ride one or two years. It is only if the recession is protracted that we become concerned as appears to be happening in this case (PL1).

The Heads discussed that parents have been hit with loss of jobs or salary freezes, the cost of living has gone up so the money for fees has been harder to find, although parents, they were aware, were doing all that they could to find the school fees. This was supported by comments made by parents in the last

chapter. So as far as the prep school is concerned there has been loss of pupils due to this. It is also true that companies have been withdrawing from England and as such staff have been relocated abroad, this has led to children being withdrawn from schools too (this was exclusively a Greater London comment). On the other side, they explained, were the fact that their costs had also increased, catering, heating etc had all gone up. Many also said that they had given their staff pay increases, although small and below the level of inflation, but they expressed a desire to show their staff that they valued them.

In relation to the closure of other prep schools, some interesting information surfaced from the discussions with a couple of the Heads.

Although we have not seen it, I have heard of pupils being moved to all-through schools or tied preps as it is perceived they are in a stronger financial position (PR3).

We had thought that when a local Prep school closed we would have benefited but this was not the case. Parents were scared of committing to another stand-alone institution. Despite looking around, they chose to not run the risk of another closure and therefore another move for their children. They were completely upfront about this decision (PL4).

So it appears that even if an individual school has survived, the market of the stand-alone school has been damaged by this recession. This is going to take some work on the behalf of prep schools to bolster faith for the future and reassure parents of their sustainability.

The second concern of the Heads, and was raised by parents, was the risk of senior schools taking pupils at 11. In this category, the Heads commented on any schools that could cause them to “haemorrhage” pupils at 11 years old, either state or private. From the comments of the senior school Heads (see next chapter), it is unlikely that the schools that take solely at 13 will alter their model.

...these are the schools which are the prep schools’ life blood... many of the major players will remain 13 to 18 schools (SL1).

However, schools that typically take at 11 and then a second intake at 13 will have been equally exposed to the vagaries of the economy and it is not incomprehensible that such schools will become more competitive and seek pupils for Year 7 as opposed to Year 9 as a way of supporting their own finances. Indeed, as previously commented upon, a new Head to the Greater London area has made it clear that he will be taking this stance, although he has not admitted it is for financial reasons. It is interesting that this has come up in discussion about current issues facing prep schools, and yet the Independent sector was not raised as a perceived competitor of the prep school. Perhaps it is because, with the previous status quo, there had been enough pupils to fill all, yet with this possible shift the status quo will be disturbed. As it has not yet happened it has not registered as existing competition, purely as a threat.

Grammar schools in particular were mentioned as a “constant worry” in both regions of this study. Some schools had got round this by stating categorically that they would not prepare the pupils for entry into the Grammar schools and insisting that parents were aware that they were signing up for the “full ride” to 13+. However, this did not stop parents giving the required notice to terminate the contract and employing a tutor to coach for the examination. Parents, of course, have the right to leave a school at whatever time they so wish, however from a prep school’s point of view, children leaving at 11 threatens the very nature of the prep school’s being.

Finally were the senior school exams. This appears to be rather specific to the Greater London market and is supported by comments of the Greater London parents in the previous chapter. However, the parents’ concern was specifically to do with the extent of and utilisation of, the time after the examinations. The Heads’ concerns were wider ranging. Whilst they too acknowledged the protracted amount of time following the exams for many students, they also expressed concern about being able to cover a breadth of study in a foreshortened period of time. They explained that by setting exams earlier, in some cases as many as five months earlier, the amount of work which required covering was still the same.

...the plethora of entrance examinations into senior schools are becoming earlier and earlier so that schools have the pick of students. Not only does this put parents in a very difficult position, it is also very difficult for the prep schools to cover the breadth of syllabi and then find a meaningful programme to keep the pupils on track for the best part of six months after their exams (PL2).

They felt that the senior schools were quite often serving their own needs with little thought to the prep schools or the pupils involved.

They went onto say that they also had concerns about the nature of many of these exams, as the Common Entrance (C.E.) syllabus was becoming less and less adhered to by the schools who were writing their own exams, and whilst syllabus were issued, it nevertheless had implications for day-to-day classroom teaching with children within a class maybe sitting for seven different schools and therefore seven different exams. The Heads explained that they did not feel that this threatened their survival but did cause them difficulties at a practical level.

It is surprising that such an issue had not been raised by parents as, within the sample, were parents who had pupils of an age who would have been presented with such issues. It may be the case that the schools are handling such issues well in the eyes of the parents who are unaware of what went before and therefore this was not seen as a problem. It is also worth mentioning that whilst parents did not comment on this per se, they had commented on the amount of time and how it was utilised subsequent to these exams, even going as far as questioning the worth of Year 8 in a prep school and questioning whether transfer to a senior school at 11 was better value. So Heads may not consider the exams themselves to be a threat to survival, just more of an annoyance, but they do need to be very aware of parental concerns and ensure that not only is time well spent after the exams, but that this is also carefully communicated to parents. Although this may not be an issue that parents new to a prep school may be aware of or concerned with, it *is* possibly an issue which current parents are hearing through “playground gossip” and could impact on their decision as to whether to move their children at the end of Year 6 or stay on for Years 7 and 8. Heads need to not only be thinking about perspective parents but also retention of existing clients.

Whilst the breadth of learning has been seen as benefit of a prep school education, it is easy to see that such a diversity of syllabi does not contribute further to breadth, as time constraints would not enable all pupils to benefit from the syllabus of others. Further to this however, one respondent felt that

Prep schools are still too focused on cramming pupils for exams and not taking their opportunities to create free thinkers who possess all the skills to learn (PL4).

This is an interesting reflection as it contradicts other Heads who earlier in this chapter were celebrating that prep school pupils had a love of learning and an ability to learn over and above pupils from other schools. Many parents were of this opinion too. The above quoted Head went on to say that

the exams were too onerous at 13+ and the pressures to achieve well were high. Children should not purely be crammed in order to jump through such hoops; they needed to be more rounded individuals with a whole host of skills at their disposal (PL4).

This Head believed that prep schools went further than many schools to achieve this diversity but felt that they still had a long way to go; but it would be difficult if senior schools demands continued as they were. It is difficult to see how such dreams could be met without agreement and cooperation from an array of senior schools. It is in situations like this where the tied prep schools could flourish, although parental choice of senior school is likely to be limited.

Two areas that I felt might have been brought up here by Heads were two of the four issues I first raised at the outset of this research when considering threats facing prep schools. Whilst parents mentioned one of them, the Heads mentioned neither as a threat or concern specifically until asked.

With regard to the Charities Act 2006, all respondents said that it was not really an issue as they had been offering bursaries, sharing facilities, and offering out staff expertise for years. One head laughed that the Act had actually been beneficial

It has given legitimacy to what I have been insisting on doing for years. This way it is far easier to convince my Governors of the need (PR4).

The Heads felt it was really a “storm in a teacup”. With hindsight, they appear to be correct.

The second expected concern was the issues involved with having become coeducational. The schools in this study were at varying stages of this process. For those that it applied to, the responses were that the coeducational process was not difficult at all with one or two exceptions, registered by two of the Greater London respondents. This was that retention for Years 7 and 8 was difficult due to the excellent girls’ senior schools in the area. Where a couple of girls did stay (or even join the school at 11), this brought implications for Games and sport as there were not enough girls for teams and playing sport with the boys was not possible. This was exactly the concern expressed by the researcher at the outset of this research. However, it is interesting to note that this was a problem which seemed restricted to Greater London, as the respondents in the Rest of England said that retention of girls to 13 was not an issue. The Greater London Heads said that they had tried to talk to senior schools about offering the girls places at 13, but they were unwilling to consider this. They had also tried to encourage the girls to stay but unless a substantial number were prepared to do so, sport became an issue and they admitted socially it was not ideal for a small number of girls either. They also understood the reluctance of parents to keep their daughters in the prep when there was no guaranteed place at 13 for them. These issues could be potentially problematic to prep schools. There could either be a very small number of girls in with a much larger number of boys in Years 7 and 8 which is not favoured by some parents. This therefore presents the problem that the girls’ parents remove them at the end of Year 6 leaving Years 7 and 8 to be boys only. Again, there are some parents who specifically want a coeducational environment for their children and so this could alienate some of the boys’ parents too, resulting in boys also leaving at the end of Year 6. The loss of pupils at this stage could mean small numbers of pupils being retained into the final two years of the school. If numbers in these two years become too small then issues of financial viability arise regarding staffing etc. Should that be the case and a school decide to close its Years 7 and 8, then the

unique characteristic of the prep school as discussed in Chapter 2 is likely to disappear and it become like any junior school in a two tier system.

The future for the prep school

When trying to differentiate categories for this last question, it was quite difficult as many of the themes to this and the previous question were so entwined. Despite this, the categorical answer to the question “Does the prep school have a future?” was “it depends” and it was usually qualified with the answer that whilst there is confidence that the economy will one day recover, the actions of senior schools are not so certain. The concerns regarding this are laid out above.

The Heads felt it was impossible to have any say in what the senior schools decided to do with regard to examinations or age of admission of pupils, although some of the Heads did express some interesting views which suggested they were hopeful of at least some collaboration.

It is better to keep prep school Heads on side so that they [the senior school] can have a better selection at 13 (PL2)

This would only be the case if the senior school still intended taking on pupils at 13 from prep schools.

Many senior schools recognise the need to take at least one third of their intake from schools other than their own feeder so as to boost numbers, attract ‘the cream’ and change dynamics that might have been in existence for nine years already (PL4).

This might be true for schools that have a tied prep school that goes to 13, but many of the tied prep models transfer at 11, so it is likely that they would want to take this approach when pupils are 11 to “attract the cream” and “change dynamics”. This would therefore have an impact on the pupils being retained by prep schools in their Years 7 and 8. If the prep Heads are saying they are happy to rely solely on the senior schools with tied prep schools, they are limiting the opportunities available to their pupils.

There will always be the ‘traditional’ schools that will remain Year 9 up only and there will be others happy to continue with the two entry points.

Prep school Heads will simply forge new alliances and advise parents away from schools who look as though they are acting aggressively towards their clients (PL4)

This may well be the case, but again the market open to parents leaving a stand-alone (up to end of Year 8) prep school is reducing and parents may not be happy with that.

I have already started talks with local senior school heads so that we can work together allowing our boys to stay to 13 (PR1).

This looks a very positive way forward and was expressed by a Head in the Rest of England. Greater London Heads spoke of having tried this approach but it had not been well received in some schools.

The second main theme that emerged was that a greater priority needed to be given to marketing the school. By “marketing” most of the Heads were actually referring to “advertising”, a common misconception. However, I think that from what has been seen so far in this research, a greater need for “marketing” in its true sense is needed. There was also talk of developing a unique selling point (USP), something which had also been recommended by the parents in the previous chapter.

They need to set their stall out as being *the* choice for a tailored education...

we need to define ourselves and scream from the rooftops about what we can deliver It is important to identify clearly the competition and ensure that we are always keeping ahead of them, being innovative but doing the basics with excellence (PR2).

A common theme although not always as eloquently put was that

Being open to adapting is essential, if we cling too tightly to the old ways then we are likely to die. However, tradition is our trading mark so we are walking a tightrope (PR1).

The Heads were passionate about their product but they were also realistic, on the whole. They realised that change was needed but with that came the concern that retaining and encouraging new parents were potentially mutually exclusive concepts.

The Head explained that while considering a potentially new market, care needed to be taken not to alienate the one that you have.

Change can frighten people. If you alter what a client bought into originally, by perhaps tapping into a new market, whether that be class or ethnicity, or whatever, you run the risk of upsetting some people. It is a big decision to make and you are likely to upset people whichever decision you make (PL1).

This awareness of the need to adapt from current Heads could help this type of school to survive, however, they need to ensure that they are doing it for the right reasons and in an informed way.

If more senior school Heads do decide to follow suit with only taking pupils at 11 then other methods of adaptation for survival would need to be pursued. The third theme was changing the model of the prep school. Here the same suggestions were proposed as had been by the parents; merging, dropping to 11, extending to 16 or even 18.

Even though one Head cited an example of where extending to 16 had worked very successfully locally:

the financial implications are huge but it has been established on a rolling programme and it has been very successful so far (PR4).

And another head commented on a school local to them which had decided to cull their final two years:

it was no longer viable with the retention of pupils and the school decided to drop their top two years. This was difficult to start with as there were redundancies and a high staff turnover after the first year. Rumour has it that staff were not happy only teaching to 11+ standard. However, as far as parents were concerned, they were happy; the numbers elsewhere in the school are stronger than ever (PR1).

It must be remembered that by doing this the nature of the prep school is changed fundamentally as was explained in the last chapter. The actual building may continue to be a school and many of the same children may attend, but its very nature is different and it would no longer contain many of the characteristics or benefits that are associated with being a prep school. A further suggestion made was to merge or join a trust. In so doing, resources could be pooled, facilities shared and cost reduced, therefore increasing security of survival and success. On head stated that

even if you lose self-governance, you don't lose your identity and I think that is key for a lot of schools. You come under the auspices of the Trust, you are governed centrally, your policies are driven centrally in line with current educational thought which is fine and it means you have greater resources to call upon on a rotational basis and you apply for it and it is there (PR1).

By this he refers to a school being assimilated into a trust which is the policy maker and controls the finances; the business behind the school, if you will. The school will continue to function for all intents and purposes as it did before in the eyes of the parents; the uniform will remain, the teachers will remain and day to day operations will continue as normal. The benefits however are that there are a number of schools within the trust so resources can be shared, funds are held centrally and spent where needed. Economies of scale also come into play when placing orders *etc* as this too can be done centrally.

It is not surprising that this particular model was not suggested by parents as by its very nature, it allows a school to continue as before with little disruption. In other words, parents would barely know of its existence.

In addition to the above gathered information, it became obvious from the discussions with the Heads that none of them came from a background of business or marketing and they even admitted to a lack of business and/or marketing training prior to appointment as Head. They explained that they had “picked it up as they had gone along”, some with a “short course” for help. The diversity of support given to the Heads within their school varied greatly, the Greater London schools appearing to be better supported than those in the Rest of England, with one exception. Most, but not all schools had full time Bursars, even some of the Bursars had support too, although that was only in two schools. All but two of the schools had Registrars responsible for recruitment, but one of these was also the Head's secretary, and another was only part time. As far as marketing was concerned, one school admitted to having bought in an outside agency to help with marketing although they were not particularly impressed. Another had employed a marketing graduate who needed work experience to help with their marketing and another had a parent with “a little marketing experience” to help out. Other than that marketing was done (or not) by the Head and senior team. Given the suggestions by the parents and

Heads for the use of marketing and business strategies to help deal with the threats facing and exploit opportunities available to prep schools, the lack of such expertise in the senior management team could mean that this cannot be done effectively.

Summary

This chapter has looked at the views of Heads of prep schools and enabled their views to be considered and compared with those of prep school parents. With regard to the benefits of the prep school, many areas which had been voiced by parents were also voiced by the Heads, namely opportunities, the environment and developmental benefits suggesting that what the parents thought they were receiving were indeed what the Heads felt they were providing. However it was not always clear that these were benefits that were prep school specific and that they could not be also obtained in a different type of school. Notable by its absence was the lack of mention of either the quality of education provided or the benefits a prep school education could afford for the future. Both of these were mentioned by parents and were therefore clearly prized by them. This mismatch of perceived benefits raises the point that Heads need to be more aware of what their market values and use this to their advantage when “selling” their school to potential clients. An additional benefit to the parents worth mentioning is the out of hours care facilities, which was not considered at all as a benefit by the Heads, although this was less surprising than the aforementioned areas.

Of greatest interest though was that not all heads mentioned the opportunities that prep schools had to offer. This is of surprise because alongside the developmental benefits afforded by the particular age range of this type of school, the opportunities that such an age range allows appears to be the crux of the nature of the prep school and is what makes it so different from any other school. Unless all Heads are aware of this and use this as a selling point, they are likely to lose potential customers.

A typical client of the prep school did not emerge from the discussions with the Heads although, with a couple of notable exceptions, the Heads were keen to make clear that a prep school client is not necessarily a privately educated individual. There appear to be more first time buyers in the market and these tend to be very well researched and specific about what they wanted from a school. This type of client will need a different approach to entice and keep them than would someone who is already aware of the system. Smaller environments and class sizes was something that many of the clients were expressly looking for, although this could be found elsewhere too in different types of schools.

A clear picture emerged about the perceived competition although this was not necessarily a realistic picture when compared with the responses of the parents. The Heads' eyes were clearly on other prep schools but there was also an awareness of the competition posed by the maintained sector, particularly from "good state schools". One section of the market that the Heads appeared unconcerned, or unaware, about as a competitor was the two tier Independent sector (the exceptions being the one stop shop and the GEM trust). This was a sector which was certainly considered by parents as competition and a sector they considered prior to making their school choices, so to be blind to this could be detrimental to the future of preps.

Up until this point, responses did not show any real regional differences, however, when asked what a prep school pupil had to offer over and above others at 13, a geographical split was apparent. Whilst many of the answers matched with the responses to the Benefits of a prep school, which was to be expected, all but one of the Rest of England Heads (compared with only one Greater London Head) added a breadth of education to the skills. The regional split is of interest but even more so is the fact that Heads, unlike parents, did not think to mention this. The parents perceived this to be a benefit, so unless Heads feel they are not actually delivering a breadth of education, which is doubtful, they need to promote this.

Another regional difference was evident, this time, when discussing the current issues facing prep school. The economy and senior schools taking

pupils at 11 were concerns for most of the Heads, however, an extra issue was present in the Greater London area and this pertained to the examinations pupils had to take for their senior schools. Frustration and annoyance was expressed about several aspects surrounding these and whilst it was not felt that these threatened the school's existence, it did cause them problems. They seemed unaware of the concerns of parents of the utilisation of the time after these exams, where five months of education was being paid for, yet its value being questioned.

Two issues identified at the outset of this research (the Charities Act 2006 and Issues associated with becoming co-educational) were not mentioned by the Heads, but were put to them as potential issues facing the prep school, which the researcher had identified. All Heads were in agreement that the Charities Act 2006 had not caused them issues as they had been issuing bursaries and supporting the community for years anyway. The second of these issues, caused more discussion and it was acknowledged that there had been some issues, not with the integration of girls but more to do with retaining them at 11. This was particularly the case in the Greater London schools. Avenues had been explored to try to rectify this but had not been successful.

There was a certain amount of fatalism coming through in the views of the Heads with regard to the future of the prep school. They were generally aware that adaptation was necessary and were willing to move with the times, yet there was an element of them not really being entirely sure what that meant. They felt rather in the hands of senior schools and their decisions, although there was a confidence that there would always be schools that took pupils at 13 which would warrant prep schools' existence. They talked about the necessity to market their schools, but their lack of understanding as to what this actually meant was evident. This led to conversations regarding the lack of marketing and/or business experience of the Heads interviewed. The range of support available to these Heads also varied greatly, particularly in the field of marketing. This in itself proves challenging. Both the parents and the Heads referred to the need for marketing yet, there appears to be little skill within the sector to allow this to happen in anything but a haphazard fashion. Mention of changing the age range led me to question their understanding of

the uniqueness of the prep school. Merger (with another prep) or joining a Trust were more likely to preserve the benefits of the prep and enable the tradition to be continued yet modernise.

The next chapter looks at the views of senior school Heads to which prep school pupils transfer. Similar issues were discussed with these Heads as were with the prep school parents and prep school Heads. The views of all three key stakeholder groups are compared in the following chapter and similarities and differences of their views explored.

Chapter 8

Senior School Head Teachers' Perceptions

This is the third of three chapters in which I discuss and analyse the results of the interviews carried out for this research. This study specifically sought the views and perceptions of current prep school key stakeholders with regards to benefits of and threats to, such establishments. The chapters have each taken a stratum of the data and analysed it in terms of the views of a particular group of respondents. Chapter 6 explored the views of prep school parents and chapter 7 explored the views of prep school Heads. This chapter will now look at the views of senior school heads.

Prep schools, albeit the standalone type, cannot be viewed in isolation; they are educating children who will move on to senior schools to continue their education (at either 11 or 13 years of age). For this reason, included in the key stakeholders group, were Heads of senior schools. The specific schools chosen were from among those attended by pupils at the chosen prep schools (see Chapter 5). Most pupils who leave prep schools, attend senior schools which either take pupils at 11 years old (Year 7), at 13 years old (Year 9) or which have an intake at both stages. Due to the nature of this research it was the latter two types of senior school which were approached for their contributions to this study. Two schools from each region were co-educational and one from each was boys only. The schools were selected by considering the senior schools to which the pupils of the selected prep schools transferred (identified from school websites). Schools which received pupils from all four of the prep schools within each region were then considered and the final choice was made through convenience sampling.

In total six Heads of these senior schools were interviewed; three from each of the pre-identified two regions (Greater London and Rest of England). These interviews were conducted at the schools and all interviews were recorded and transcribed in the same manner as the interview with the Heads of the prep schools. The senior school Heads were posed similar questions to those asked

of the previous stakeholders, covering the following areas:

- Benefits of prep schools educating pupils to the end of Year 8
- Clients of such prep school
- Competitors of such prep schools
- Benefits of such prep school pupil, over and above other schools
- Current issues facing this type of school
- The future for this type of school

Again, these were solely used for guidance and conversations took their own directions where I guided but did not control, the discussion. As with the prep school Heads, the senior school Heads were very forthcoming and happy to discuss the above issues at length.

This chapter, as before, will be subdivided by the questions/theme (where suitable). However due to the nature of the responses, two of the questions will be combined i.e. the benefits of a prep school and the quality of a prep school pupil. In previous chapters these have elicited similar responses to each other but there were still enough distinctions to warrant them being treated separately, this is not the case in this chapter and so they will be dealt with together. In addition, responses to the question about competitors will not be discussed as this raised no new information.

The views and perceptions of these stakeholders were coded and analysed and the discussion below compares and contrasts the views of these stakeholders and makes comparisons with the views expressed in the previous two chapters.

There emerged from discussion with the senior school heads a distinction between types of prep schools; their differences in nature acknowledged. A further departure from previous comments is the view expressed by senior school heads regarding the academic strengths of prep schools, or more precisely, the argument that such a benefit does not exist.

Responses of senior school heads

The respondents are comprised of six senior school Heads.

It is perhaps understandable that the responses of senior school Heads and prep school Heads may be conflicting as each will have their own interests in mind and many of the senior school Heads interviewed took pupils at 11 as well as 13 and therefore prep school were in essence a form of competition.

Prep school benefits

Even more than with previous stakeholders, this question was interlinked with the responses to “What does the prep school pupil (who attends a school which educates pupils to the end of Year 8) have over and above others?” and so these two questions will be addressed here together.

The opening response by a Greater London school Head was “it depends on the prep school!” This was the first time that a distinction of this type had been made by any respondent. It may be because the Heads of senior schools are in the position of interacting with several different schools on an ongoing basis and are better placed to notice such things. I am surprised however, that parents did not make such a comment, given that at least some of them had considered other prep schools prior to their final choice. It may be that their responses reflected the general benefits of prep schools and not the specific benefits of their current school or due to the fact that they are not in a position to judge/observe other prep schools’ outputs.

Some are better than others. You learn very quickly which schools you want to foster a relationship with and which you would rather discourage. Like anything, they come in all shapes and sizes and are of varying standards. You also need to consider their strengths, some of the smaller preps are great for pupils who need that intimacy, but you are unlikely to have sporting excellence in a child from that type of school. “Horses for courses” really! (SR2)

This type of view was supported by some of the others to a certain extent although all of the other Heads were also willing to offer some general benefits

which they thought applied to all prep schools and their pupils. These views were in line with those held by the parents and prep school Heads, namely a breadth of knowledge which included the mention of a Classics background, greater grounding in French, greater sporting excellence, a greater likelihood of playing two or three musical instruments, and “usually but not always, a greater grasp of the 3 Rs so they are ready to tackle the expectations of GCSEs”. In contrast, one Head expressed a lack of literacy ability from pupils moving from prep schools and would rather they join at 11 so as to iron out these issues as soon as possible. Again, this highlights the diversity of views being expressed. Another commented on the more mature approach to work and greater independence of learning. In both regions, again in line with parental and prep school Heads’ beliefs was the mention of better leadership skills and greater confidence.

Any child who joins us at 13, no matter where they have come from are the same for the first few days. They are the “newbies” and have all the usual fears and anxieties, but the prep school child adjusts far more quickly. Their confidence grows (or surfaces) and they are away (SL1).

Of key interest here however was a view expressed by three of the Heads across both regions which was the concept that they believed prep schools did not produce academically more able pupils.

From our tracking data, it is clear that pupils who join us at 11 perform better in GCSEs than those who join at 13 - the majority of which are from prep schools (SL2).

Whilst another agreed with this view, he added that he felt prep schools were socially of benefit to pupils, but academically, the benefit was doubtful. This view is only expressed by four of my respondents and as already mentioned, the sample size is too small to make any generalisations, let alone relying on the views of only four respondents. However, if this view is found to be a more commonly-held belief, it could have an effect on the section of the prep school clientele looking for excellence of results and not the holistic aspect of the prep school education/ethos.

If this is indeed the case, then it is not surprising that prep school Heads did not mention this as it would not reflect positively on them or their schools, or perhaps they are unaware of such information. From the sample interviewed within this research there is a clear disparity between the views of the senior school heads and those of the client parents of prep schools with regard to the academic effects of prep schools. However it has to be acknowledged that the measure of academic excellence of the prep school tends to be its success in getting pupils into their chosen senior schools and not the results achieved two or three years later at GCSE. GCSE success or otherwise tends to be attributed to the senior school. It would be worth investigating why this difference in achievement at GCSE might be the case, especially as when the syllabuses of the GCSE and Common Entrance for languages and maths are compared, they cover extremely similar topics and to a similar depth. So in essence, the pupils in prep schools will cover much of the work again in their senior schools. Perhaps it is the case they switch off and become disinterested.

These above views are of added significance given the following comment of one Head:

Year 7 is often a wasted year in senior schools as the pupils take a long time to adjust to their new surroundings and expectations as they are not really mature enough to cope with the change. Everything academic is really put on the back burner (SL1).

This view was supported in the literature which suggested a dip in motivation and attainment in the first two years in secondary schools. The National Middle Schools' Forum (NMSF) a noticeable decline in pupils' learning behaviour in Years 7 and 8 in a two-tier system (National Middle Schools' Forum, 2002), however this drop did not appear when children stayed on in middle schools (Gillard, 2011).

So we have senior school Heads stating that they would rather pupils join at 11 as they perform better at GCSE than those who join them at 13, we have prep Heads saying that the Common Entrance examination in some subjects is

too demanding and covers the majority of the GCSE syllabus anyway (*i.e.* pupils need to cover it by 13) and another Head saying that Year 7 in a senior school is wasted time for pupils as their developmental stage is not sufficient to make the needed transition at that stage. Given this diversity of views they may be explainable in a number of ways although again this will need further investigation. The extent of the prep school syllabus and the restrictions of Common Entrance examination (of which more later), has potentially some effect on this. Alternatively, perhaps, timetabling has something to do with it; all the extras offered by a prep school which contributes to the holistic experiences and to moulding and developing the social benefits may come at a cost - that of academic teaching time. One Head, in response to this question said

Benefits of a prep school? To supply the senior schools which start at 13. Without them we are stuffed! (SL1)

This is but one view and certainly said with a smile. The other senior school Heads have shown that they value prep schools slightly more than this Head indicates, but it may be that this is the harsh truth. In contrast to this one view and far more in line with the Heads of preps and the parents of prep school pupils, were the comments about the excellent facilities, the range of opportunities (both in and out of the classroom), “a first class academic education” and “wonderful manners and behaviour”.

So it can be seen that whilst many of the benefits of the prep school and of their pupils given by the senior school Heads have echoed those discussed in previous chapters, a distinction between different prep schools has also been introduced. This distinction is twofold: first, the quality of individual prep schools and perhaps any specialisms they may have. Second, the difference between the schools that predominantly feed senior schools that only take at 13 and the schools which feed a mixture of those that take at both 11 and 13 and those that take at 13. Whilst these distinctions were not explicitly made, the differences were apparent from the nature of some of the responses.

The other main revelation from this set of interviews was the expression of

doubt in the academic excellence associated with prep schools. This was purportedly backed by statistical, tracking data comparing GCSE results which it was claimed showed that those joining a school at 11 did better in these exams than those joining at 13. This tracking data was only referred to by one of the Heads, although the benefits of joining at 11 as opposed to 13 were espoused by other Heads too. It was not possible to find such statistical data for independent schools in the literature to support or discard this claim even though one of the Heads stated that he had such evidence for his school. However, when data surrounding state middle schools is considered, research has suggested that there is no benefit at GCSE of having joined a school at 11 or 13; any benefits of a three-tier compared with a two-tier system were no longer evident (Jesson, 1999; Wyatt, 2012). There are a number of reasons why this could be the case but further research would be beneficial so that prep schools can use the reasons to inform their teaching and future.

Prep school clients

The main view of the senior school Heads with regard to the nature of the prep school client were: those wanting entry to a certain type of senior school i.e. the schools that take at 13 only. This is of particular interest as it was not a view expressed by the prep school heads themselves, however has certainly emerged from an analysis of the data in this research and is discussed further in Chapter 9. Secondly was an expression of customers who were seeking “a solid start”/ “good foundation”/ “the best”. In addition to these two views, a couple of the senior school Heads also made reference to “traditional values” and a smaller environment, as had previous respondents. Overall, no new type of perceived client was identified by this set of stakeholders. The emphasis tended to be on those seeking a good start in the educational stakes or those looking to move to a particular type of senior school.

Issues facing prep schools

In line with responses from other stakeholders, the in this section Heads identified the economy as being a current issue facing the prep school although their explanations as to why that was the case differed.

As with the parent key stakeholders and the prep Heads, the senior Heads raised the view that “other schools” were a potential threat to the prep school. Similar issues emerged as discussed in the previous chapters with the concept of parents preferring to choose a school which enabled their children to be educated from 4 to 18 being raised. The senior Heads also supported the views previously voiced that retention of girls at 11 was difficult in some areas due to the traditional nature of girls transferring at 11 to girls only schools. The Heads also acknowledged that some boys can be lost at this stage too to either good local Maintained sector schools or to other independent schools:

There is a feeling of the market being snatched by some senior schools who are doing everything they can to attract pupils at 11 instead of 13 (SL1).

Another Head, this time from the Rest of England (rural), added to this by suggesting that more and more senior schools are likely to move towards this age range as it fits the two tier system better and allows for greater ease of movement between the sectors (independent and maintained). He felt that given the length of the recession parents are concerned about committing themselves to private education and committing to 13 was more of a risk than to 11. If they were in a position to continue to afford private education then they could embark on the next stage from 11 to 16, more smoothly and at a more convenient transition point for their child(ren).

This view is contradicted however by a Greater London Head who said that “we would rather go co-ed than drop the entry age to 11.” He said that his staff would not want to teach the younger children as they valued and much preferred exploring their subjects with older more enquiring minds, the school’s facilities would not be suited for younger pupils and that the 5 year

group age span was more homogeneous than a 7 year age span. From a financial perspective he also felt that by recruiting pupils for Year 9, they would have been in the school too short a time to consider leaving for the sixth form, so by not having a Year 7 and 8, they were guaranteeing their sixth form numbers. It seems that there are two distinct thoughts on this which may well impact on the future of the prep school, but again supports the emerging theory of two types of prep school clients. *i.e.* those wanting a holistic education compared with those “buying a future”.

A relatively new theme when considering other schools though was a reference to boarding schools by Heads. It is interesting that whilst some of the prep School Heads interviewed did have boarders, only one had commented on it, and that was in passing as a benefit. Four of the Heads thought that the decline in boarding would be a problem for prep schools as this would not only lose them pupils but also that boarding fees were where a good profit margin was made so this would be an extra loss. However, this reference to a decline in boarding seems to be rather out-dated. The latest literature has indicated that boarding seems to have seen a resurgence, albeit a small one and following a different pattern from before. This idea was first mooted after the success of the Harry Potter books and films with children wanting the same experiences as the book characters. Even though the books and films have long been released the number of boarders have held steady at about 68,000 over the last 10 years (Moriarty, 2013). Whilst Harry Potter in itself is unlikely to be totally responsible for the gradual growth in boarding, given the explanation of parents and their need to work, it is conceivable that the combination of the two has had an impact on boarding. The change in nature is from termly boarding with perhaps one designated weekend leave either side of half term, to a more flexible model. This model is either weekly boarding or flexi boarding (*i.e.* odd nights here and there as desired, or even a couple of weeks at a time). (Lockhart, Gilpin & Jasiocha, 2013).

One Head (Greater London) mentioned the social mix within schools possibly being an issue. This has been mentioned in the previous chapters and the explanation given here by both respondents mirrors the previous views expressed. They felt that care needed to be taken to ensure, as far as possible,

that sections of the market were not alienated through a school becoming too “ethnically unbalanced” and also the issues involved with having only one or two girls stay to 13.

There were two extra issues that were brought up by senior school Heads. One of these, not raised previously by any respondent was the influence that nursery feeders had on the destination of their children. They were suggesting that unless a prep school had forged good ties with nurseries, then there was a risk of children being directed elsewhere. The second was mentioned by four Heads, three from Greater London and this was to do with the Common Entrance examination. We have seen in the previous chapters the concerns expressed by parents and some Heads of preps regarding examinations; both Common Entrance exams and individual school exams. Here the Heads pick up on one particular angle although they are not entirely in agreement.

...poor use of pupil time in Y7 and Y8 in preparing for either unduly complex and ambitious entrance exams for some schools, or the poorly judged and badly run Common Entrance exams. Prep schools tend to teach to the syllabus and let these determine everything that happens in their school and this is limiting.

The Common Entrance exams in June come too late for it to be useful for us [senior schools] to use as a selection process, so it does not really serve a purpose (SL3).

The feeling here was that due to this, parents may not want to send their children to such schools (preps), however, the syllabus is not an area that was commented on by the parents.

Whilst in agreement with the sentiment of the potential of the C.E. curriculum restricting teaching and learning, and with the poor timing of the CE from the perspective of selection of pupils, another Head was still in favour of C.E. as a tool to keep pupils working as close to the end of the academic year as possible. He felt that it could be utilized by senior schools as a method of setting pupils, not selecting them. The merits of the C.E. examination have long been the subject of controversy as can be seen in the

literature review, but it appears that prep school Heads need to try to open up dialogue with the senior schools so that a satisfactory solution can be found to this – a solution whereby, senior schools can select their future pupils, but where prep schools can teach a less prescribed syllabus. Whilst it is acknowledged that prep schools are free to pursue their own routes, there is fierce demand for senior school places and so prep schools need to deliver what is being asked of their pupils for entry to these senior schools. Should such an agreement fail to materialise, there could be implications for prep schools. For example, senior schools will continue to make their selections when they want, placing continuing pressure on the prep school to complete a variety of syllabi in limited period of times and to then make meaningful use of the remaining time of Year 8. Should parents have any beliefs that this constitutes “wasted time”, they may be of the opinion that this particular educational route is less beneficial than had previously been thought. This could result in pupils being removed at eleven and not continuing to thirteen. This might not be an overnight event but word of mouth and “playground talk” can be influential. This is just one potential scenario, but highlights how a prep school’s viability can be impacted upon. More of such issues are discussed in Chapter 9.

In line with all other stakeholders, the economy was identified as the biggest issue facing the prep school. Along with this, identified were other schools, social mix and examinations. All of these had several facets to them. The distinction between the two types of prep school emerged again (those primarily feeding schools that only take at 13 and those feeding those that take at both 11 and 13). There were also geographic divisions made with regard to the issues facing the prep school. Boarding was referred to as a threat due to its decline, although this is not supported by the literature as seen in the Association of Boarding’s Spring 2013 publication.

Whilst some of these concerns facing prep schools are beyond the realms of influence of the schools and their Heads, there are also many issues which can be taken heed of and used to ensure that prep schools are more informed in

their decision making. There are also areas which can be turned to their advantage. Some of which are explored below.

The future for the prep school

There were some very interesting comments made in response to this question which, even though made by only a single voice, may be worth further investigation. Generally the views were very much divided with no geographical divide being noticed. Three respondents felt that

[the] importance of the traditional prep school will continue to diminish unless it is of the type that supplies the senior schools that take at 13 (SR1).

The number of senior schools which take at 13 only is a very small market. In England there are only eighty such schools (some co-educational, the others boys only) (Anon., 2014). This means there is also a limit to the number of prep schools needed to feed them although those that do fit this criterion are likely to have a secure future. One head describes this as a

symbiotic relationship which works perfectly well as long as we all stick to what we are doing then there is not much danger of it collapsing (SL2).

Another view expressed was that so long as a school was sufficiently large (a precise size was not given), and a school had a good reputation and perhaps some individuality, then they too would survive as

the product is a good one, with an age range which is credible and serves pupils well (SR1).

A proponent of this view did however caution that this may only be the case with the London markets. They were not so sure about the rest of the country. The “individuality” commented on here can be likened to the USP which was referred to by parents and prep school Heads in previous chapters.

Further suggestions as to the direction in which the prep school might need to move, if it were to improve its chances of survival and appeal to a new and wider market, were different from those suggested in the previous chapters by the stakeholders. The first is to become co-educational. This is a route which has already been taken by many prep schools already and the majority of those who haven't already followed this path tend to be those that have found their niche already by supplying the senior schools which only take at 13. These are boys-only schools and as this partnership is already working well and the numbers being supplied are the numbers required, there is little need for them to go co-ed. The second suggestion is to alter their age range, but not in the ways that had been previously been recommended. The idea here was to open their own nursery. This way, children would automatically feed through to the rest of the school. This would also avoid problems of having to rely on other nurseries making recommendations to parents. The final two suggestions both talked about boarding and were made by a school governor from the Rest of England. The suggestion was twofold but both referred to how the rural schools could extend their market appeal. The first suggestion was to exploit the overseas markets; those looking for tradition and English education. The second is to extol the virtues of rural living, clean air *etc* and aim this at the overseas markets and the urban British markets. Both of these ideas seem to be potentially viable and are certainly worthy of further investigation. A number of the Rest of England (rural) senior school Heads expressed that they certainly went down the line of attracting overseas customers and they knew many other senior schools doing the same. Maybe there is a market for the prep school too. There was certainly a feeling expressed by this particular group of stakeholders of the possible demise of the prep school, particularly in the Rest of England. The extenuating factor would be if it were a school that supplied the schools that take at 13. However, despite this feeling, there were ideas put forward which, when taken in conjunction with working on the concerns as expressed in the previous section, could actually breathe a new lease of life into the prep which feeds 11 and 13 intake schools. Promoting individuality (a USP), going co-ed and extending their age range had all been raised in one form or another by previous stakeholders. New ideas both revolved around boarding. Despite its decline having been mentioned in response to the previous question, two

different respondents felt there were two new markets to be investigated which would aid in the survival of the Rest of England (rural) prep schools. These ideas were to promote the rural nature of these schools and open them up to urban and overseas markets. This “rustication” issues refers back to the discussion in Chapter 2 regarding the original definition of the prep school.

Summary

The previous two chapters have looked at the views of two main stakeholders in prep schools; the parents and the Heads. This chapter has taken a wider view of the stakeholder and considers the views of Heads of senior schools to which prep pupils go. This new group of stakeholders demonstrated very little regional difference of opinion. When compared with the previous respondents, some similarities could be seen although there was evidence of much difference of opinion too and so this in itself has highlighted issues for the prep school and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

This was the first group of respondents who really made a distinction between types of prep school; the general and the one who specifically fed the senior schools that exclusively take at 13. There were references also, mainly made by senior school Heads, that generic prep school benefits could not be defined as it depended on the individual prep schools.

The belief by parents, prep Heads and some of these senior school Heads that prep schools offer academic excellence was seriously questioned by two of the senior school Heads. They expressed concern about the literary abilities of some of the pupils coming on to them, about the restricted nature of the syllabus being covered in Years 7 and 8 and, in some circumstances the lack of work covered in the last five or six months in the prep school. This latter concern had also been expressed by some of the previous respondents. There was also more than one mention of the fact that pupils who had joined their school at 11 fared better at GCSE than those who joined at 13. In the light of a comment by another Head that Year 7 was pretty much a wasted year in senior schools as children took so long to adjust and were too young to cope

with such things, it begs the question of how these two comments can be reconciled and what lessons can be taken to make better use of Year 7 and 8 in the prep school so that such children can perform better at GCSE. It may be possible that these two comments cannot be reconciled and are simply a difference of opinion between Heads of two different types of senior school with a particular perspective. With regard to current issues and the future for the prep, all three groups of stakeholder referred to the economy. The senior school Heads reflected the views expressed in the previous chapters. They simply said that some parents wouldn't be able to afford the fees but one said, this was unlikely to be an issue as grandparents often paid school fees to 16 years of age. Once again, this was a completely new view and was not supported by any other stakeholder. However, all were of the opinion that other schools were a threat, especially those taking pupils at 11. Another issue, partly brought about as a result of schools taking at 11, is that of social mix. This view had been expressed in various forms by all key stakeholder types.

An area of particular interest highlighted in this chapter is that of boarding. It had only been mentioned in passing by other stakeholders, yet here, it was given some voice, even if misinformed. A general belief was that boarding was in decline, which goes against recent literature which suggests a slow, upward turn. If this is the case then there is much to be said for exploiting this to its full, particularly in the Rest of England where boarding is still available. Many of the London Prep schools did away with their boarding facilities when boarding declined in the nineties. This is a good opportunity for the Rest of England markets as they appear to be the more at risk. There are many ways the boarding concept can be explored, from encouraging flexi boarding to relieve pressure on tired parents, to providing "preparation" for senior school boarding life, to pushing rural life to an overseas, or English urban market. This opens up many new potential markets.

The Common Entrance exams and other exams for senior schools were considered to be an area of concern as their worth and timing were questioned by senior schools Heads. There was concern that prep schools let the exams influence too greatly what goes on in them. This is not entirely surprising though as they have to prepare their pupils to pass them. The second part of

the concern was a reflection of the comments by parents and prep school Heads and referred to the timing of these exams. As the belief of the client and the provider at least have some commonality with regard to “dead time” after the examinations, then this suggests that a change could be made which would be of benefit for all involved. If such changes could be made it could have not only an academic benefit but could also act as good public relations (PR) as parents like to feel that they have a voice and that their views are acknowledged and acted upon and if such changes could be made, the school are likely to create loyalty and good will which will reduce, in market terms, “exit” (Gorard, 1997). Of course, this PR would only be relevant to the current cohort of parents but as has been discussed elsewhere word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool.

With a few exceptions, already mentioned, the views expressed by the senior school heads were relatively in line with the views expressed in previous chapter by the other stakeholders. Unsurprisingly the issues mentioned by prep school Heads regarding the impact senior schools were having on prep schools were not echoed by the senior school Heads. Whilst they did make reference to schools that take at 11 being of concern and referred to the complexities associated with the Common Entrance exams, none of them acknowledged that, these issues in part at least, were caused by the senior schools themselves. Their inability to do so may suggest that they are in denial of the part they play or simply that to admit to it would suggest they may have to do something about it. The preps schools have many areas worth exploring whether they will be assisted in some of these areas or not it is impossible to say.

Having looked at the views of three different types of stakeholder in Chapters 6 to 8, the next chapter considers their views and takes a step back to identify broader issues which are having an impact on the prep school. These issues will be discussed and related to the literature previous laid out in Chapters 2 to 4.

Chapter 9

Challenges for the Prep School

The previous three chapters have looked in detail at the responses received, through interview, from key stakeholders in prep schools. These three chapters have discussed the views of leading stakeholders of preparatory schools, namely, the parents, the preparatory school heads and senior school heads (who receive preparatory school pupils). This chapter considers the responses which have been gathered and compares and contrasts respondents' views and beliefs. By making such comparisons it became possible to identify areas of interest and areas which may need further investigation. This chapter discusses not only the specific responses but also takes a step back and looks at the broader challenges facing prep schools in the 2010's.

There were several areas highlighted by respondents which they perceived as potential threats and opportunities for the prep school and these are considered and discussed in conjunction with the earlier presented literature pertaining to this study. I will also reflect, with the benefit of hindsight, on the shifts which occurred over the ten-year period during which the research was conducted.

There is no one single threat to stand alone prep schools identified which will cause a rapid terminal decline, however, there are a number of identified threats which, when taken in combination, could precipitate a longer slow decline unless acknowledged, understood and acted upon. The threats tend to fall into two categories: one temporary issues; and two, enduring issues. The future facing particular schools depends upon the specific combination of issues they confront. As far as the prep school sector as a whole is concerned, it is possible that all threats do not need addressing and survival is possible by addressing just a few. The most potentially difficult of the issues which has arisen from this research and which was not apparent in the literature review, is the emergence and strengthening distinction between two types of client: those wanting a truly holistic education and those carefully planning their

child's future through schooling to career. The entry into the market of the 'first time buyer' is boosting this second strand of client who has their child's future mapped out and is searching for the appropriate prestigious schools to ensure a path to their desired university and then future career (e.g. lawyer, doctor, accountant etc). This dual market was initially evident within the London region with the majority of the Asian parents interviewed having this approach. However, upon further investigation it was evident that many of the first time buyers across both regions were also of this mind-set. It must be noted that within the London Asian market, the parental background (first time buyers or independent sector educated themselves) made no difference and this particular group of clients appeared to form a specific market whose views were now being echoed by many non-Asian first time buyers. Whilst a second type of client could be embraced as an opportunity and may well be by some, there is the potential that the two markets may not coexist successfully together within a single establishment and choices as to a school's direction may need to be taken.

With regard to the issues which the key stakeholders considered to be threats to the prep school, there was a consensus that the protracted economic situation (a long recession) was the most serious one affecting the prep schools of England, irrespective of geographical location. In addition to this their responses identified perceived issues that ranged from competition from other schools (both in the Independent and Maintained sector), through to lack of USP, to potential legislative measures imposed by the Government of the day, to name but a few. These specific issues have all been commented on in the previous three chapters, it is the position of this chapter to look at the more general messages being received from the analysis and these broadly fall into categories: the economic climate, the nature of the market, regional differences, business acumen and lack of cohesion of opinions of the key stakeholders.

Opportunities and challenges

Through interviewing key stakeholders of prep schools it has been possible to ascertain their views and opinions about prep schools, their perceptions of the market in which the prep school operates and the issues currently facing such schools. These views in conjunction with relevant aspects of literature have enabled challenges facing prep schools to be examined and possible opportunities to be identified. Whilst it is not always possible to change a challenge into an opportunity, being aware of the challenges ahead is likely to present more of a chance to overcome them than having to be reactive at the last minute.

The economy

During the early stages of this research there were considerable changes in the economy with the idea of a recession being muted much earlier than it actually happened in 2008 (Office of National Statistics, 2013) this eventually progressed to a double dip recession whilst this research was being undertaken. Of all the issues raised by the stakeholders as issues of threat to the prep school, the economy was the one mentioned most often and by all of the stakeholders. It was raised as being a cause for concern within the private education field in general, but of specific concern to the type of prep school under investigation in this research. This is because many of them are relatively small in size and are reliant on only themselves and their revenue for survival (i.e. they are stand-alone establishments without the financial support of senior schools or Trusts and the resulting economies of scale).

As far as respondents to the research are concerned, they were interviewed after the 2008-2009 recession period and this will inevitably have impacted on their responses. Whilst Britain emerged from the recession in 2009 after six consecutive quarters of economic contraction, the growth for the last quarter

of 2009 was low (Parliament, 2010) and it was with similarly small growth, budget cuts and high unemployment that the country continued for the next few years until April 2012 when the UK was once again officially declared to be in recession. This lasted until the first quarter of 2013 when growth occurred but was only 0.3% and the economy was forecast to take some time to recover (Office for National Statistics, 2013). As this research unfolded, so too did the reality of the economic situation the country was in - a prevailing situation rather than a single one off event. Unsurprisingly, this was raised as an issue by many of the keystakeholders interviewed in this research and supported in literature, being recorded as the worst recession for eighty years (Davies, 2010) and having a very negative effect on small businesses (Richardson et al., 2011). In fact, it was the most frequently cited suggestion as a cause for concern for prep schools.

According to the ISC, a report has commented on the resilience of the independent school sector during this recession and that, despite the severity of the recession, the pupil numbers have been less affected than during the 1991 - 1994 recession (Lockhart et al, 2013). It has emerged from this research that for this to be the case there have been some considerable sacrifices by parents, with them foregoing holidays, or securing second jobs etc. This view was supported by Graham Gorton, head teacher of Howe Green House School and chair of the Independent Schools' Association in an article where he is quoted as saying "..., many parents are clearly making great sacrifices to keep their children [in school]..." (Anon, 2010).

The independent sector may have been resilient overall but many smaller standalone prep schools have not been so lucky with regular news reports of one or other school closing. Mr St John Smith, a member of the ATL's ruling executive is reported as having said that "to date we have had 17 closures [of independent schools] with more in the pipeline... Most of the schools that have closed are small prep schools" (Clark, 2009). This has inevitably changed the landscape of not only the independent sector, but also of the educational playing field in general. More children have potentially been looking for

maintained sector education places, in turn, putting a burden on an already oversubscribed system in many parts of the country – a survey of 850 head teachers carried out by The Key, a support organization for school leaders, reported that 87% were concerned about the shortage of state school places (The Key, 2013). The larger schools (often those that go through from 2 to 18, or preps attached to senior schools) have managed to grow yet larger due to economies of scale (Anheier, 2014). As mentioned by one Head, standalone prep schools are being viewed as not so stable because reports in the papers comment on such schools closing. Should this become “dinner party” conversation, the threat to the stand alone prep heightens further.

The effect of the economic situation in the UK has impacted on the ability of parents to pay school fees and a need for them to remove their children from private schooling or to make sacrifices in order to maintain their choice of private education. This has therefore had a knock on effect and affected the number of pupils on the school role of independent schools and therefore reduced their income. In addition to this there has been a poorer return on investments and endowments of schools and supplies have also been more expensive as companies have increased their costs to cover their own overheads. In other words, independent schools have had financial pressures acting upon them in two directions. This in some cases has had an effect on the ability of the schools to maintain buildings, retain the levels of staffing they desired and to resource the schools in the manner they had. These effects will be more acutely felt by smaller schools (such as the stand alone prep school of this study) which are not for example in a position to bulk purchase or rely on funding from a senior school etc. Some of these issues will be quickly amendable once the economy becomes more favourable, however there will be some aspects of this need for financial shrewdness which is likely to take longer to rectify and could have a knock on effect with regards to attracting new customers for a lengthy period of time.

The market

Emerging from the gathered data is the existence of two types of prep school client. Initially these distinctions were evident in the London market with a second strand of customer being formed by the majority of the Asian parents. From this research it has emerged that the background of the Asian customers (i.e. either first time buyers or independently educated themselves) did not appear to affect their purchasing reasons (i.e. to secure a place a prestigious senior school, then university and then desired career). However, with further analysis there was also evidence of this second market within the first time buyers being identified in both geographical locations. In other words, it appears that the Asian and non-Asian, independently educated parents had different reasons for their educational choices, whereas many first time purchasers were acting in a similar manner to the majority of the Asian parents questioned.

Whilst these were not specifically expressed by any key stakeholder when asked about a “typical prep school parent”, the general responses led me to deduce a division: one group looking to eventually send their son (not so their daughters) to the public school type institution i.e. the schools that still only recruit at Year 9 or have a large intake at Year 9. These parents have often, although not exclusively, looked at where they want their child to end up i.e. “successful/ high flying career” (doctor, lawyer) and worked backwards regarding which university they need to go to, which senior school will enable them to achieve this and then which prep school is needed. The other client is the parent wanting an holistic style education who enjoys the additional opportunities and experiences available to 12 and 13 year olds in prep schools over and above what would be possible in Years 7 and 8 in another establishment. The latter category covers parents of both boys and girls, whilst the former refers purely to parents of boy in this research. This gender specific theme emerged after the data was analysed and so clarification as to why this was so could not be acquired from the respondents in this study. Neither was this an area which arose in the literature. From a purely speculative viewpoint, it could potentially be due to a more traditional view of the male needing to

support the family and be the “bread winner” and therefore earn as much as possible. Alternatively it may be associated with a belief that the more prestigious a job/career and the position attained the greater the status of the family. Both of which are actually identified in the literature regarding boys under achieving. Changes since the second World War have meant the idea of masculinity has been challenged (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999) and this may be something the families are picking up on (whether consciously or subconsciously). Arnot et al (1999) asserts that “masculinity is shaped not just by society or local cultures but by individuals or groups, who take up positions in order to maintain their superiority in relation to the other groups” (p. 149). Perhaps the parents are trying to achieve such superiority for their sons.

This differentiation in client type is not specifically supported by the literature, although research rarely refers to prep school clients specifically as distinct from independent school parents in general, in the few places where indeed it exists. The literature asserts that “aspirations for the parents with children in private schools were much higher than for those with children in state schools” (West & Noden, 2003) and strongly emphasises that academic success is at the forefront of parental decision-making with regard to education (Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, & Wilson, 2010; Fox, 1995; Stein, Goldring & Cravens, 2011). The literature though does not go on to say that this is the sole reason for school choice. It tends to suggest that this is important but so too are other aspects such as good range of facilities (Bagley et al., 2005), quality of facilities (David et al, 1994), school security *i.e.* safe environment (Coldron et al., 1991), smaller classes (Roker, 1991). This supports the idea of parents wanting an holistic education. The distinction between the two types of client is not clear from the literature.

Whilst the possibility of having two strong markets could be seen as a great new opportunity for prep schools, there is an element of there being a potential challenge if an individual establishment tries to cater satisfactorily for both type of clients. There is a risk that by trying to attract the two different markets they may compromise themselves and dilute what they are offering in the eyes of their two differing markets. At present it does seem as though these two

markets are managing to co-exist although with parents becoming more informed and knowledgeable about exactly what they want, these two markets could soon be in conflict. However, if a school decides to choose one of the two markets and cater for their needs, it is likely the potential conflict be avoided in the long term. This is supported in the view expressed by Heads of senior schools key stakeholder category. Here it was commented on that in their minds there were already two types of prep school; those that focus on supplying pupils to the senior schools which only have an intake at Year 9; and then the others. This may become a more obvious division going forward within the prep school field. If such a division does occur, then this in itself could see a change to in the educational landscape the schools face. Those schools choosing the more academic route to cater for those “futureproofing” their child’s life, are likely to become less like the prep school characterised at the outset of this research which prided itself on educating the whole child and providing a wide variety of opportunities and experiences. The prep schools who opt to remain a truly holistic educator will be reliant on clients from those who have been previously independent school educated themselves and a few of the first time buyers who are looking for this type of education. As it stands this, by its nature, is a finite market. In addition to this, as has been commented on in Chapter 8, senior Heads are questioning the academic benefits of the traditional prep school and this could impact on their desire to take such pupils at Year 9 instead of Year 7. This could prove fatal for the traditional prep school unless it has ties to (or some sort of agreement with) a senior school.

As well as this division in the market, is the addition of the first time buyer, who according to the Heads interviewed, are well prepared, questioning and very aware of what they want. This is a developing market and perhaps reflects the economic climate where parents are feeling financial pressures and are more than ever, wanting a good return on their investment. They want to be thoroughly prepared and to know exactly what they are paying for. This type of client does not have the loyalty of previous clients (*i.e.* parents who themselves had been privately educated). They are prepared to shop around until they see the best fit for what they are looking for. They will need a different type of approach from the traditional parent and will need things

explaining clearly, there is no room for Heads to omit information because they consider it obvious. They need to be totally aware of what they are selling and promote all of its aspects. This new type of client adds to the challenges being faced by prep schools as they will need to be very clear as to what it is they offer and be in a position to back up their promises. This new client brings greater accountability than has been the case previously; they are acting as customers in a market place and looking for value for money. With the first time buyers acting as customers in a market place, their demands and expectations will be noted and heard about by other parents, some of whom are likely to feel they can make demands of their own. This creates further pressure on the schools and the need to manage these demands so as to avoid a “critical point” situation where parental demands out balance what it is possible to deliver. If this point is reached, then either parents leave or the school financially outstretches itself to deliver beyond its means.

In addition to this is the education versus market battle, the tension of which was being felt by the Heads in this study. Ball (2007) talks of the transition from a Keynesian National Welfare State to a Schumpeterian Workfare State which sees the state as a monitor of public services rather than a deliverer or funder. Ball (2007) talks about the “redistribution of funds away from direct funding of public sector organisations and local authorities to contract funding...and a commitment process of making state agencies free – standing, self-financing organisations” (p. 23). This is the direction being moved in by the maintained sector with the growth of Academies and Free Schools, with the independent school sector being held up as the model to follow. However the tension being experienced in the independent sector indicates it is not necessarily an easy path to tread. Heads and parents in this research were valuing the educational and developmental aims of the prep school and were not viewing the point of a school as being a profit maximising venture. However, a prep school is under threat from market forces and there-in lies the tension of trying to satisfy both the aspects of education and market.

A major threat identified by the majority of respondents was pupil transfer at 11 years of age. Whilst this did not specifically refer to schools

becoming co-educational, it did however bring up issues which I identified as a risk of becoming co-educational and so marries up in that sense. *i.e.* lack of retention of pupils at age 11. The issues surrounding this are rather “chicken and egg” like and could be challenging to overcome, particularly so in the London market. Typically girls’ schools have an intake at 11+ only with places not offered at any other time if a year group is full (Walford, 1993). This presents as a risk to parents who, for a number of reasons, choose to move their daughters at 11 *e.g.* risk of not getting a place, wanting daughter to immerse herself from the start with friendships *etc.* The other side of this is the fact that as most parents of daughters feel this way the one or two who are prepared to take the risk then are impacted by the negatives of their daughter being in a gender minority by staying at their prep school. The disadvantages attached to this mean that the girls are in a male dominated environment, which parents do not favour and there are too few girls to create teams unless they either join with boys or younger girls. This is something which prep heads will need to address and perhaps come to an arrangement with local girls schools if they are to maintain a co-educational establishment all the way to Year 8.

There is also a loss of some boys at 11 but this is primarily due to movement to grammar schools and is geographically specific, as not all areas have grammar schools. This is a difficult square to be circled by prep schools as it is often a financially-driven decision by parents and therefore difficult for a fee paying school to compete with unless they can offer bursaries or scholarships, but money is finite and cannot be offered to everyone, so needs to be an individual decision of a school.

In addition to grammar schools, competition from new schools such as academies or free schools gives potential customers greater choice in the school market and as we have just discussed, the first time buyer of private education is shopping around and has no pre-disposition to any one type of establishment. Research in America has cautioned that the establishment of charter schools in their country (which are very similar to free schools in England), resulted in a 6% loss of enrolment from the private sector (Walberg,

2007), and so cannot be taken too lightly. Whilst existing customers may have greater loyalty, this is by no means enough in itself to keep clients. With these new options and also other independent schools as competition, the challenge for prep schools continues. However the literature as discussed earlier in Chapter 4 did not support a move away from the independent sector to the new academies (Drake, 2015) and this is also supported in the literature on marketing whereby Porter states that new entrants to the market are not necessarily as threatening as they may appear (Porter, 2008). It is nevertheless necessary for prep schools to be aware of the market, both in terms of the competition and in terms of what the customer is looking for. They need to be meeting the requirements of the clients and matching, if not bettering, what is on offer by the competition. This challenge is compounded by the academic pressures of extended curricula to ensure pupils win places to suitable schools at the age of thirteen.

When issues of the competition facing prep schools within the education market were discussed with the key stakeholders, there was suggestion that perhaps mergers could help fight some of the potential issues being faced, or an alteration of the age ranges. However, as discussed earlier in this thesis with regard to middle Schools, the range of ages covered by a prep school (and indeed the middle schools of the earlier discussion), hold a particular set of advantages not found in the two tier system. These advantages included the ability to combine the best of primary and secondary education with using subject specialists and exposing pupils to staff with different personalities and passions (Blyth, 1980) enabling children to develop their own true interests and avoiding the potential damage of being restricted to being educated by a single teacher with very different interests from the child's (Morgan & Morris 1999). Pashler, McDaniel, Rohter and Bjork, (2008), supported the benefits of being exposed to different teaching and learning styles by a number of teachers instead of a single class teacher for everything. This type of school also enabled pupils of 12 and 13 years of age, a key period of physical and emotional development, to be contained in a smaller and familiar environment without the additional stresses of embarking upon a new experience in what is often, a much larger environment (Cannon, 2005; Symonds 2015). Yeomans and Arnold (2013) argue that

behaviour is learned and so keeping experiences to a more age-restricted and appropriate level can only be beneficial. Finally in support are findings from a number of studies reported upon by Gillard (2011) which noted a dip in academic achievement in Years 7 and 8 of senior school pupils which was not noticed in the pupils of a similar age in the middle school set up.

All of these benefits as cited in the literature and some by the respondents in this study, together with the other issues identified by parents and Heads (again in this study), such as increased confidence and maturity, opportunities to lead, personally develop and try new things not available to Years 7 and 8 in the two tier system, would be lost if the age range were to alter. The expression of this by some Heads as being a possible way forward, suggests a lack of understanding of the uniqueness of their establishments and leads to the following discussion about the lack of business acumen held by many prep Heads.

Lack of business acumen

As just mentioned, the lack of business acumen of the senior management team of the schools also came through in this research. Literature has also supported this finding (Dimmock, 2002; Turner, 2007) with Heads questioned admitting they need training and development in this area. It is not surprising as the vast majority of Heads in the prep school either trained as teachers or started their careers in teaching and worked their way up to their current position. They will therefore have little or no managerial or business experience where running a business is concerned; their experience is in education. Whilst a Head is not solely responsible for the running of the school, other than the Governors, the Bursar is likely to be the only member of the senior management who has experience outside education. Although this can have some benefits, it can also be problematic as the bursar is looking at the finances and doesn't necessarily understand education and the Head understands education and not the financial necessities.

Tensions will arise between social and economic values and herewith rests the challenge to ensure these work together as a team and not against each other – the desire here is to remember that the business of a school is to provide an education in the most cost effective manner where compromise and team work are essential. It would also be advantageous for Heads and other members of the SMT to be up skilled in matters business orientated so as to be more informed and be able to balance the complexities of education and business, especially with the emergence of such a discerning clientele. This is something very much supported by Everard, Morris & Wilson (2004) as they promote “the building of “learning bridges” (p.x) between educational and non-educational establishments. It may even be prudent to consider the introduction of a wider network of support teams as has been the case in universities (Goodall, 2009) with the Head remaining the educationalist and others taking the strain of the business activities.

Earlier in this study the concept of marketing was considered as the prep school is in essence acting as a business. From this literature review, it was clear that a number of skills, strategies and knowledge are desirable in order to run a successful establishment. The concept of the “Seven Ps” (Product, Place, Price, Promotion, People, Process and Physical evidence) were introduced as was the concept “Porter’s Five Forces”. These two concepts highlighted ways in which Heads need to be thinking (together with their senior management teams) and also encompassed strategies and ideas suggested by some of the parental responses in this study. According to the literature, it is necessary for Heads to have an awareness of where on the services/goods continuum their product sits (Dibb, Simkin, Ferrell & Pride 1991; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010) and a clear idea as to exactly what they are providing both their main product and their subsidiary products such as pastoral care, provision of meals, extra-curricular activities, access to social networks etc. (It is fair to say that many of the Heads in this survey were aware of some, if not all, of their subsidiary products, it was their main service they were less vocal about!).

Goods and services offer a collection of benefits to the consumer and a knowledge of the perception of these benefits is crucial. It is this perception which needs nurturing and feeding (Dibb, et al. 1991) and will need highlighting when promoting the school. In addition to appealing to the perceptions of the client, a knowledge of the client (in this case normally the parents of the child to be educated¹⁵) and how they make decisions is also advisable. Here, marketing literature suggests that there is information gathering before decision making (Solomon, 1992), however, school choice literature believes that educational choice is made on gut instinct or social networking information (Gilbert, 1991; Smedley, 1995). From the research gathered in this study, with the emergence of the first time buyer in the independent sector, it appears that there is more of an information gathering consumer emerging. If this is indeed the case, then Heads will need to be fully clued up on exactly what they are selling and what their client is wanting. From this study and supported by previous studies reviewed in the literature, key aspects being looked for by parents are academic success, ethos, situation and facilities (West, 1994).

When showing parents around a school or even on the website, it is important that it is known and remembered that decision makers (i.e. the parents) often perceive the providers of the service as the service itself. This is partly because of the intangible nature of a service. In order to attract customers, staff need to be kept well motivated and trained and both of these elements highlighted to parents. As this type of service is delivered at a particular venue, the facilities not only need to be fit for purpose but need also to aesthetically pleasing and cosmetically appealing. In addition to this, other appropriate cues need to be identified and highlighted depending upon the target market (Sandhusen, 2000).

In order to not only survive, but to thrive as a business, new custom is essential and ensuring people are aware of one's existence is crucial, but again

¹⁵ Literature has suggested that pupils are involved in the decision making process, however this tends to be based on research involving pupils of secondary school age and in the maintained sector (David et al, 1994). Edwards et al (1989) state that pupils are less involved in the decisions involving private schooling. Given the age of prep school pupils, it does seem unlikely they will be involved to a great extent.

the appropriateness of where and how their attention is attracted is important. Burrow (2009) suggests using newspapers, magazines, radio, television, the internet and open days. These are a few of the many options but again the target market needs to be kept in mind. Current and past parents also act as publicity for the school and so care needs to be taken not only to be looking for new customers but to also keep happy those they have got. Mura, (2009) comments that “referrals are around four times more effective than advertising” (p.27) and that “75% of us trust personal recommendations more than we trust advertising” (p.120). Not only should one’s existence be exposed, but so too must every effort be made to reinforce the difference between value gained and the cost charged.

This realm of finance tends to fall to the bursar but on many occasions the bursar is not even in the picture until parents have already been recruited so there are areas of the financial side of things and pricing with which the Head needs to be familiar. In addition to this, quite often the Bursar is an accountant and not skilled in pricing strategies themselves. This further supports the idea of the need for new roles within a school to provide the necessary support. Getting the right price for a product is important; too low and it could be considered inferior, too high and a business could price themselves out of the market (Smith, 2012). An awareness of the competition and what they offer and charge (Solomon 1992) is always a good starting point but is not enough by itself. Smith (2012) suggests a school is not able to “bundle” goods in the same way as perhaps a bank or technology provider could. However, parents in this research were suggesting types of “bundling” when they were commenting on reductions in fees for sibling groups. Reference has also been made in this research to the idea of subsidiary products such as meals and extra-curricular activities, so perhaps actually a form of “bundling” could be creatively applied by schools. Bursars should always ensure costs are covered however the Head is likely to have a greater awareness of how “bundles” could be created and offered.

Not only is there a need to have such an awareness of the consumer and their needs, there also needs to be a great awareness of supplier power. This includes availability and cost of all resources (often this will fall to the Bursar)

however it also includes attracting and retaining good staff. This is a role of the Headmaster.

From this it is clear how much is involved in running a successful business and it is not surprising that the Heads in this study and in others mentioned in the literature did not feel they had the skills necessary. Where there is a high competition (eg London) all the tools and strategies need employing and education providers need to be proactive (Hill et al., 2008), in the more rural areas, Heads are likely to manage by using a few of the techniques. In this research parents advised schools to find a USP and all schools would benefit from doing this in one of three ways according to Porter through cost¹⁶, differentiation¹⁷ or focus¹⁸ (Hill et al., 2008).

Lack of cohesion of key stakeholder views

Connected with this lack of business knowledge is the overall impression that what parents thought they were buying was not necessarily what the prep Heads claimed they were selling. In other words, there was a lack of cohesion with what was being valued and promoted by prep school Heads and what was being voiced as being valued by the parents. This has been touched on briefly before, but now requires further exploration. The traditional prep school clientele would be aware of what they were buying and would not need the benefits being advertised to them as would someone with no prior knowledge. In essence the product sold itself without much promotion to the “traditional” consumer. However, the first time buyer will need convincing and persuading that it is the correct product for them and in order to do this the prep Head must be fully aware of what is valued by the parents as discussed above.

The Heads’ knowledge, awareness and most importantly, communication of this needs to be much stronger. Even if evidence is suggesting something, so long as the parents perceive it to be a benefit, it is worth promoting e.g. parents perceive that prep schools offer a long term academic advantage,

¹⁶ *Attracting customers through pricing strategy*

¹⁷ *Delivering something not delivered by the competition*

¹⁸ *Focusing on a particular target market.*

evidence seems to suggest otherwise; anecdotally from responses in this research and more reliably from the literature on middle schools (Jesson, 1999; Wyatt, 2012).

There were also discrepancies between views of some of the Heads of the prep schools and senior schools. Whilst competition will often present different opinions and views for customers to consider, prep school Heads need to be very aware of the desire by some senior schools to attract pupils at 11 instead of 13 and have a very strong counter argument when persuading parents that the prep school is a serious contender to educate their child.

Impacting on the entire situation here regarding cohesion of responses could be a lack of empirical evidence supporting any of the stakeholders' perceptions. An over-riding impression gained from the interview process was that respondents were self-referencing (*i.e.* talking from their own experiences). This meant that any comments made were only from a personal point of view, either through experience, anecdote or "common sense". It is questionable as to how much referencing of cases interviewees would do given the nature of the conversations being had, but it could perhaps indicate how little research into this area has actually been carried out which supports what I have found when trying to investigate these issues. It also adds backing to the lack of cohesion of views if, through their different roles, the stakeholders are having different experiences. However, this only flags up the need for greater communication between stakeholders and more research into the prep school world in general.

Regional differences

The final "big picture" perspective identified was that of regional difference. London has its own identity and although the capital of England, it is not representative of the country as a whole. Whilst London's individuality was not quite so starkly apparent from this research, it is true to say that it did have issues of its own over and above those it shared with the Rest of England. It appears that the market being served by the prep school is the same across the

country, however, in addition to this, Greater London, has a second market, specific to that region. This tends to be predominantly Asian in nature but was also identifiable as a trait of many first time buyers across both regions and is comprised of customers who have specific aims and pathways already mapped out for their children, as has been previously discussed. In addition to this separate clientele, the market in terms of competition also looked different for the two regions. The Greater London market comprised mainly of competition from other prep schools and the Rest of England market was made up of the wider category of independent schools. The final main regional difference involved the promotion of the school by the heads: the London prep school was not promoted in terms of the breadth of education although it was clear that this was just as broad and very similar to the education provided in the Rest of England prep schools. It is possible that due to the number of prep schools in the London region, it was considered not necessary to make such a statement but chose to focus on its differences instead.

Summary

This chapter has considered the findings from the previous three chapters and also looked at the bigger messages delivered through the information collected for this research. It has looked further at the ideas and suggestions made by the respondents to this study with regard to their views of the challenges and ways forward for the stand alone prep school. Whilst respondents named several areas they considered to be potential challenges, they could be grouped into five main categories when the broader picture was being considered; the economic climate, the nature of the market, regional differences, business acumen and lack of cohesion of opinions of the key stakeholders. Whilst it is unlikely that any single area discussed will in itself prove fatal to prep schools, a combination of such events could initiate a long, slow decline. It is not necessary to eradicate all of the threats but at least with awareness the impact could be limited.

The final chapter of this study will summarise the main findings of the research and will evaluate the methods used. Recommendations as to possible

improvements will be made and suggestions given as to further research which may be appropriate. Any suggestions arising from the research with regard to the prep school will be proffered.

Chapter 10

The Final Picture

This chapter revisits the main research question and reviews the discussions in this research including a summary of the literature review, methodology and of the responses from the key stakeholders. It then moves on to identify the main conclusions arising from the research and considers whether or not these are specific to the prep school or are likely to be acting on a wider educational market place. Finally the limitations of the research are identified and further research suggested.

Summary

This study aimed to answer the main research question:

What can the perceptions of key stakeholders of independent prep schools tell us about the current position and future viability of such schools in England?

In order to address this main question, three sub-questions were employed to assist in the information gathering process. These were, in the views of the identified key stakeholders:

- What is a prep school? Are there benefits of prep schools and the education they provide?
- Who are considered to be the main competitors of the prep school?
- What can prep schools do to ensure their place in a future educational market?

These three sub-questions were used to formulate the questions asked of the key stakeholders in this research and formed the basis for the literature search in order to address the main question. This was a circular process with the literature being used to set the scene, answer the research sub-questions and to investigate further some of the issues raised by the respondents.

For the purposes of this study the key stakeholders were identified, with help from previous studies (Anderson et al, 2001; Friedman et al, 2006), as

- Heads of prep schools
- Parents
- Heads of Senior Schools
- Chairs of Governors
- Representative Body (in the UK, the Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS))

The latter two of these groups were rejected after the information gathering and analysis stage of the research due to a low response rate and anomalous results emerging from these key stakeholder groups. The study continued with three key stakeholder types.

Prep schools

Prep schools have evolved over many centuries and cannot be traced to any one individual establishment with certainty. Now, they form part of a larger independent educational sector in England. They are a diverse range of establishments with leaving ages varying from 11 to 13 to 16. The specific type of school being looked at for this research is the prep which educates pupils from Early Years to the end of Year 8. Whilst academic literature is limited regarding these establishments, especially in recent years, prospectuses and websites do exist. From looking at a variety of these, many of the prep schools claim to offer very similar educations and experiences to each other, frequently claiming the same unique selling point (USP). Some of what is claimed to be offered is clearly available from other educational establishments too either within the independent sector and/or the maintained sector. What does come across as unique about prep schools which take pupils to 13 is the unusual age range and the benefits which can be associated with this. The reason for the age range is historic but has nevertheless been

sustained. The prep school forms part of a three-tier education system as opposed to the more common two-tier system. At one time, this too existed in some parts of the maintained sector, with middle schools being of the same educational phase as the prep schools. The middle school now remains in only a few parts of the country (e.g. Somerset); however, there were emotional, social and developmental arguments in favour of the middle schools and these apply equally to prep schools.

These arguments in favour of the emotional, social and developmental advantages to such schools were also raised by the respondents in this research. In addition to this they raised other potential benefits, some being mentioned more than others. With the top two years of prep school pupils following what is known as the Common Entrance syllabus, there are certain requirements regarding facilities; these include resources and teaching staff. In Years 7 and 8 of the two-tier system, such resources and facilities are likely to be available but the benefits of the prep school are that these are available to younger pupils too, so the likes of Years 5 and 6 are also experiencing these. When compared with Years 5 and 6 of a junior school, prep school pupils are advantaged. Year 7 and 8 gain advantage in these types of school as they are the eldest pupils. They are not competing with Years 9 to 11 (or even 13), for places in school teams, plays *etc.* They are also in a position to experience leadership roles, something which they would be unlikely to do until much later in a two-tier senior school.

Key stakeholders also voiced their opinions that in addition to these benefits, prep schools also promote three main further benefits: small class sizes, an education in classics, and superior sport. The benefits of all three are supported in literature (Blatchford, 2003; Clark, 2011; Distler, 2000; Hanson, 2012; Uttley, 2012), although it is not possible to say with certainty that these will not be matched in independent schools in the two-tier system, with perhaps the exception of Years 5 and 6's exposure to Latin (and/or Greek) in most cases.

To the best of my knowledge, marketing theory has not been applied to the nature of the prep school in previous studies. In this study the prep school is

viewed from this perspective and the literature utilised to identify strategies which could be beneficial to the prep school. The prep school offers a service which delivers education to a consumer market. Such a product is classed as intangible (it cannot be physically held), inseparable (the presence of the pupil and other pupils affect the experience), perishable (it cannot be delivered in exactly the same form at another time) and heterogeneous (variation exists in delivery even if the topic is the same). It is deemed to be labour intensive and demand a high degree of customer contact. Whilst the prep school can be seen to be positioned at the service end of a continuum, it can be shifted slightly towards the product end through the use of branding. This does not make it a product, but it gives it the appearance of such, although care needs to be taken with branding so that the right image is portrayed.

With a service to offer and a customer who purchases it, a prep school can be considered to have the features of a business. As a business it needs to satisfy its customer and make sufficient money to at least sustain itself, if not to make a larger profit. However many prep schools are charities and as such governed by the Charities' Commission and its rulings which impose restrictions regarding finances and profits.

Key stakeholder responses

Having considered from a theoretical perspective the answers to the first two sub-questions of the research, attention is turned to the third of the three sub-questions and this involved gathering and analysing data from a number of case studies as described above. The views of the key stakeholders displayed very little geographical division but Greater London had three main specific differences; a second type of customer; issues involving retention of girls at 11 and concerns regarding senior school entrance exams both in terms of syllabi and timings.

The perception of the parents as to the prep school customer was that they wanted the best education for their child, they were upper or middle class, professionals. They valued the prep school for the opportunities offered to

pupils whilst at school, and in their future life. Their views, on what was thought of as competition and which schools they considered when choosing a school, varied in both geographical locations. In London, independent and prep schools were identified as competition but only preps considered when it came to choosing a school themselves. In the Rest of England a similarly restricted group of schools were given when asked for personal consideration of schools (independent sector), whereas a wider range was given as competition (good state and independent schools).

Confidence/maturity and diversity of experience were considered benefits with the Greater London respondents adding academic knowledge to their contributions. On the other hand, threats were perceived as the economy, good local schools and schools taking at 11. In addition to this, in the Greater London region, concerns over 13+ exam pressure and then the hiatus in learning afterwards were also raised. Views, in respect of ways in which the prep schools need to address the threats facing them, were given as: improve marketing and think about creative fee offers. Regional differences also emerged in this area. Rest of England parents suggested that changing the age range of the school may be necessary, whereas Greater London, suggested mergers. In addition to this, the Greater London area also commented on communication with parents needing improvement, the need to be more community generous, and a better use of post-exam time was recommended. Some of these issues raised are likely to be more of an immediate problem than others with regards to impacting on pupil recruitment. Issues such as retention of girls at eleven and issues regarding “downtime” after CE examinations are less likely in the short term to hinder recruitment as they are only apparent once in the system and possibly even later, with hindsight. However, parents do talk and if these concerns are discussed, there could indeed be an impact on perceptions of prep schools and this could affect retention at 11 in a more general manner and also recruitment to such a school in general.

With regards to the prep Heads’ views, they made no comment on quality of education or benefits the prep schools could afford for the future. Neither did they describe any specific type of client, but they did identify the new “first

time buyer". Competition was perceived to be other preps and good state schools, with two-tier independent schools not even being considered. With regard to benefits of prep schools, a geographical split emerged with the Rest of England favouring the breadth of education on offer.

Issues identified by this group of stakeholders included economy and senior schools taking at 11 which were in line with other stakeholders. Greater London respondents added their concerns about 13+ examinations; in particular the syllabus and timings of these. When it came to considering the future, prep Heads seemed almost resigned to whatever the future may hold. They admitted adaptation was necessary but were not sure how to achieve this. Various suggestions included, marketing, mergers, and age range change.

The third of key stakeholders types, the senior school Heads, were the only group to identify different types of prep school. They identified a difference between schools that fed the likes of Harrow and Eton, *i.e.* schools which only have an intake at 13, and those that sent pupils to other schools which took at 11 and 13. Another distinction made by this group was that individual prep schools have their own identities with them having strengths and weaknesses in different areas.

A further area of reflection to emerge from this third key stakeholder type was a debate about the academic abilities of prep pupils, with some Heads claiming no benefit at all of being educated in a three tier system compared with the two tier system, with one going as far as to claim a disadvantage.

Conclusions

Having summarised above all of the literature reviewed and research conducted and in so doing, answered the sub-questions of the research, it is now pertinent to return to the original research question posed at the outset of the research, which is:

What can the perceptions of key stakeholders of independent prep schools tell us about the current position and viability of such schools?

The prep school is positioned in the education market. This is a busy market with an obvious division (maintained and independent). With recent new entrants to the maintained sector (*e.g.* academies, free schools) the likes of which, in America, have attracted clients away from the independent sector (Walberg, 2007), caution is necessary. Although customer numbers are reasonably stable (Lockhart et al, 2013), and there are still a core of traditional clients who will consider only a few alternatives (if any) when thinking about their choice of school, the nature of the prep school client is changing with the emergence of the “first time buyer”.

These new clients are contributing towards the growth of a separate type of consumer market. This dual market may have been in existence for a long time (and was apparent in the Asian London clientele of this study) but the addition to it by some of these first time buyers may have made it more pronounced and may explain why it has not appeared in the literature. The established market has been one looking for an holistic education, the other, although it may well have existed for years, is beginning to emerge as separate *i.e* a parent with their sights set on a specific future for their child who has their mind set on a final destination; they decide on the career, the university, the senior school and therefore the desired prep school. This dual market is poses a paradox which is likely to be challenging to rectify as both markets may consider their chosen education type diluted if schools are trying to deliver to both market segments. This is likely to result in schools needing to opt to supply one or other of the two markets which potentially compels the schools pursuing the more “future proofing” type of client (a market which appears to be growing), to diverge more from the traditional prep school as described at the outset of the research. Those pursuing the client in search of the more holistic education are likely to be facing a finite market and therefore greater vulnerability to financial shocks. This is an issue specific to the prep school given its position within the three tier system.

Other issues were also identified which could impact on the viability of such schools, however some of these issues could impact on the wider education market too and not just be specific to the prep school. The economic climate was most commonly mentioned by respondents and was associated with a range of risks: purchasing power of parents had been reduced and so some could no longer afford prep school education; schools had poorer returns from their investments and endowments; suppliers' costs had increased. Whilst being an issue for prep schools, it is plausible to identify that this would be a problem for all independent schools, with the smaller establishments being most effected as their financial margins will be much smaller than the larger establishments.

As mentioned above, in addition to the more traditional client of the prep school who themselves were privately educated, is the first time buyer. These new clients are acting in a far more customer orientated way and willing to shop around until they get exactly what they want, demanding greater accountability from schools. This could lead to a "critical point" scenario whereby schools will financially outstretch themselves to retain clients or risk losing them. From this research it is evident that this is a potential issue for the prep school, but it is likely to be as big an issue for the independent sector in general, with parents considering purchasing education in more of a consumer manner. This leads directly to a further issue which is likely to be experienced across both sectors as schools are needing to act themselves far more like business in order to survive. Although many independent schools are actually registered as charities, they need to act in a business-like manner to raise sufficient funds to not only survive but to "grow" their schools. The same type of scenario is being faced by the Academies in the maintained sector with the necessity to hold, if not increase, their numbers to be able to access funding. This scenario of providers of education having to act in a business manner and be subject to the whims of market forces is likely to be a dilemma increasingly faced. This tension which exists between the business aspect of a school (i.e. a need to make a profit) and the educational values (for which a school exists) was evident particularly through the views of the prep school Heads who are first and foremost educationalists. Whilst these tensions have

been commented on with regard to the maintained sector and universities (Goodall, 2009), the independent sector has often been held up as the model to follow (Ball, 2007). However, it appears from this research that such tensions are becoming increasingly evident in the prep school too, with the loss of something intangible in the juggling act which is now required.

Emerging from this research was the lack of business acumen of the heads of prep schools and it is conceivable that this is applicable across the whole of the independent sector. Heads tend to be educators who have become managers. This is true too in many maintained sector schools although there have been cases of Academies being run by “people from business”. Whilst both scenarios bring their own problems, the message arising here is that Head teachers need to have a greater awareness of the ways of business in general but also need to have a team on which to call for the more specific issues involved in running what is increasingly amounting to a business (albeit a charity). Through having such a support team and by having a greater personal knowledge of business-related issues and their customers, the Heads will be in a stronger position to ensure they are promoting what the customers are wanting, play to their perceptions and ensure that the key stakeholders’ views are more cohesive. They will also be in a position to identify and exploit USPs, pricing strategies or niche market tactics to strengthen their chances of survival. In other words, schools will be able to use and apply the concepts of marketing as discussed in Chapter 3 in the most productive way for their establishment to ensure survival.

Continuing with the nature of the market, transfer at eleven is an issue facing many prep schools but this is an issue due to the prep school being part of a three tier system in a country which is predominantly a two tier education system. With regard to boys leaving, whilst it inevitably impacts on numbers, it does not pose quite the same problems as do girls leaving at this age i.e. Years 7 & 8 becoming either entirely single sex or predominantly boys. This matter of girls leaving is mainly limited to London but may need some creative thinking in this region to try to rectify it. Whilst at present schools are managing to sustain their top two years, there could be an impact in the longer term on the viability of these top two years, particularly if the schools opt to

pursue the more holistic market as opposed to the more “future proofing” market. The latter of these markets is likely to be a boys only route anyway, with this research having identified it was predominantly the boy’s parents behaving in this manner and looking to send their sons to the Year 9 only intake schools. Therefore a boys only on boy dominant Year 7 and 8 are less likely to be a concern. The holistic market on the other hand, could possibly be more sensitive to a single sex environment as many of these pupils move to co-educational senior schools. Any such threats to the viability of Years 7 and 8 risk altering the entire nature of the traditional prep school identified at the outset of this research. As mentioned above, these threats may not be immediate as some of these issues only become evident once inside the system, however word of mouth is a powerful tool and in the longer term could impact on recruitment and retention.

Again, a matter predominantly being faced by the London market was that of exams. In the case of the prep school this is referring to C.E. examinations and individual senior school exams being sat by pupils. The pressure and stress resulting from this whilst real, is not unique as children in other independent schools and in the maintained sector also sit exams at various stages, bringing similar pressures. What is specific to the prep school however is the range of syllabi needing to be taught for the different senior school exams and the early nature of many of these exams. This ideally needs liaison with, and the understanding of, senior schools to try to overcome these issues. Again this is an issue which is likely to impact on the prep school in the longer term unless rectified. These are issues which are more likely to be identifiable once in a school and/or with hindsight, however parental discussions could impact upon future recruitment of pupils or retention of pupils come Year 6. As has been highlighted before, it is unlikely that any single issue is sufficiently severe to cause a terminal decline of the prep school in England; however a combination of the issues could contribute to a slow demise. It is advisable that the prep school sector acts to minimise as many as possible, recognising that is not necessary, nor realistically possible, to eliminate all.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to the study, many of which have been acknowledged as they arose in the discussion. They are reiterated here for consideration. As has been seen above, the research initially divided England into two geographical regions for comparison. However, once the number of schools available in the northern region became evident, then anonymity became very difficult to promise. This led to an alteration of the geographical regions and resulted in Greater London (urban) being compared with the rest of England (rural). Given the unique nature of London and its status as England's capital, it would have been preferable to either use a different large city for comparison purposes or even compare London with other cities as a group. Whilst this research has established a great number of similarities between the chosen regions, there were also differences which may purely be a result of having compared London with rural prep schools (i.e. these could be issues for urban prep schools, not London-specific).

This research study commenced in 2004 with periods of time spent away from the project. This has meant that there have been more Government changes, legislative changes and educational proposals than would have usually been the case in such a study. The protracted nature of this study meant that what appeared to be of threat to the prep school at the beginning had come and gone. This helped to show that some of the threats were ephemeral where as others had endured. Had the research concluded in the normal amount of time, the research findings may have been very different with there still being speculation about issues that in effect ruled themselves out.

The responses from all of the interviews need a certain amount of caution taking in the sense that the respondents all agreed to the interviews. There were several who refused and some who did not respond at all. This "self-selection" whilst giving willing and non-hostile interviewees could possibly mean a distorted set of results. There is no way of knowing what the other interviewees would have said differently. So bias needs to be considered.

Again, in relation to the interviews, if at all possible, telephone interviews would not have been held in place of face to face interviews due to the loss of non-verbal cues. Even though when being analysed there was no noticeable difference in responses, for the sake of fairness, further respondents would have been located instead.

Recommendations

On consideration of the study carried out here, the research would suggest there are a number of recommendations which would be worthy of consideration to help avoid the decline of prep schools. These are listed below in no particular order:

- Prep school Heads would be advised to gain business and marketing knowledge in order to be more effective as the leader of an organisation which operates as a business and ensure they have a better understanding of how to market it. An awareness of the 7 P's of marketing and Porter's Five Forces affecting the market would be a starting point. In so doing they would be in a better position to
 - Understand what their customer is wanting and deliver it – if appropriate
 - Understand the emergence of a dual market
 - Understand the different approach required for the “first time buyer”
- A greater unity of views between stakeholders
- More management/administrative/marketing available to Heads to ensure the school is marketing (in the broadest sense) appropriately
- Measures to be taken to retain girls to 13 (London market)
- Consider financial assistance in more creative manner – a service enables pricing to be done on an individual basis (Mills, 2002)

- Development of Boarding (Rest of England market) – perhaps re introduce the idea of “Rustication” (Leinster –Mackay, 1984)

Further research

Given the dearth of literature available on the prep school, any research would be of benefit to fill this gap. In addition to this any research along similar lines to this which address the limitations already mentioned above.

However, specifically from this research, there are two areas which have arisen which would benefit from further research:

1. This research suggests that the prep school market consists of two different types of client. In the London area, this was predominantly an Asian market. However, a fair number of the “first time buyers”, who are new to the prep school market and not exclusive to the Greater London region, were expressing similar views. It appears that developing across the country are two strands of prep school client, one looking for an holistic education for their child(ren), the other with a desired senior school, university and career for their child(ren) in mind. As this has the potential to be two difficult markets to satisfy in one establishment, further research would enable clarification as to whether they do indeed exist and shed light on how best they can co-exist.

2. Literature (Jesson, 1999; Wyatt, 2012) supports the academic benefits given by the three-tier system until the end of Year 9. At that point research suggests that any academic advantage is lost and progress is the same between students irrelevant of their two-tier or three-tier background. Similar suggestions were made by senior school Heads in this research based on their own data analysis from their school. One Head went further suggesting that pupils joining his particular school at 11 did better at the end of Year 11 than did pupils joining at 13. Further research would be recommended to investigate

if there are any long term academic benefits of a three-tier school education (specifically a prep school education) and if not, why do there appear to be advantages to the end of Year 9. At present there are several threats to prep schools and if one of the key perceptions of parents that an academic benefit exists, does indeed not, then it could mean the closure of such schools which will in turn have implications for the education market as a whole with more pupils needing to be educated elsewhere. If this academic benefit does not exist in the long term but proves to be present to the end of Year 9, then further research may identify why this is the case, enabling it to be altered and therefore actually deliver what is currently perceived.

Final thoughts

Having completed this study it has become clear to me that there are many areas needing to be addressed by prep schools if they are to remain part of the educational framework of England. Competition is increasing and customers becoming more discerning and therefore relying on how things used to be done is no longer enough - even though part of the attraction of the prep school is its traditional values. It is an establishment that has many positive attributes but which needs to become sharper with regards to its knowledge of its customer and their requirements. Whilst its future looks viable in the short to medium term, the longer term prognosis is more uncertain but could be strengthened if certain changes are made. From a personal point of view, it has informed me with regards to my career and the type of schools I will be seeking employment in and educated me in ways I could direct a school if in a managerial role.

Appendix A

Summary of Research Methodology and Methods

	Considered	Employed
Strategy/Methods	Quantitative Qualitative Mixed Methods	Mixed Methods – with major emphasis on qualitative data
Epistemology	Positivism Anti-positivism	Anti-positivism
Research Design	Ethnographies Case Studies	Case studies - collective
Methods	Questionnaires Interviews	Semi-structured, face to face interviews (with a few telephone conversations where necessary)

Appendix B

Questions discussed with parents and Head teachers

- What do you consider to be the benefits of a prep school which educates pupils through to the end of Year 8 (age 13/14)?
- **Why did you chose this type of school?**
- **Why did you chose the specific school you did?**
- Who do you think are the clients of these prep schools? Is there a specific type of client? Does your school's client fit this description?
- What schools are competitors to the prep schools?
- **Which type of schools did you consider before making your choice of education?**
- What, in your view, does the prep school pupil have over and above others? (if anything)!
- What, in your view, are the current issues facing this type of school?
- What is, in your view, the future for this type of school?

N.B. These were the general areas used to promote conversation. Further ideas were explored as they arose. Those in bold were specific to parents only.

Appendix C

Interviewee References

				Greater London (L)	Rest of England (R)
Prep schools (P)	1	Small		Parents 1 - 7	
	2	Medium		Parents 1 - 8	Parents 1 - 9
	3	Medium		Parents 1 - 7	Parents 1 - 7
	4	Large		Parents 1 - 7	Parents 1 - 8
Senior schools (S)	1			Official intake Year 9	Official intake Year 9
	2			Official intake Year 7 & 9	Official intake Year 7 & 9
	3			Official intake Year 7 & 9	Official intake Year 7 & 9

Examples:

The prep school Head from the large prep school in London will be referred to as PL4

A parent from the small prep school in Rest of England will be referred to as PR1/6, this parent would be different from another in the same establishment referred to as PR1/2

The senior school head referred to as SR1 would be the Head of the senior school in the Rest of England which only has an intake 13 years of age.

Abbreviations

AHMPS	Association of Headmistresses of Prep Schools
AHPS	Association of Headmasters of Preparatory Schools
ATL	Association of Teachers and Lecturers
CC	Charities Commission
CE	Common Entrance
CIM	Chartered Institute of Marketing
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GEM	Global Education and Management Systems
GM	Grant Maintained
HMC	Headmasters Conference
HMCI	Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills
IAPS	Independent Association of Prep Schools
ISC	Independent Schools Council
ISEB	Independent Schools Examination Board
ISI	Independent Schools Inspectorate
KS	Key Stage
LEA	Local Education Authority
NC	National Curriculum
NMSF	National Middle Schools Forum
NUT	National Union of Teachers
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ONS	Office of National Statistics
SATs	General Certificate of Secondary Education

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