

windshift

**Parents' perspectives of
secondary school teaching**

Prepared for New Zealand Post Primary Teachers'
Association (NZPPTA)

June 2007

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Introduction

This report contains the results of an investigation commissioned by the New Zealand Post-Primary Teachers' Association [NZPPTA], into the attitudes of parents of current state secondary school students towards secondary school teaching.

The project comprised two elements:

- Four focus groups conducted in Auckland, Hamilton, Christchurch and Milton, Otago among a range of parents of current secondary school students.
- A subsequent survey of parents of current secondary school students from throughout New Zealand, extracted from a nationally representative telephone Omnibus survey of 2000 people aged 15+.

The focus groups were used to explore a range of attitudes towards secondary teaching, secondary schools and public education. The survey investigated the prevalence of some of those views – and the perceptions and preferences that lay beneath them.

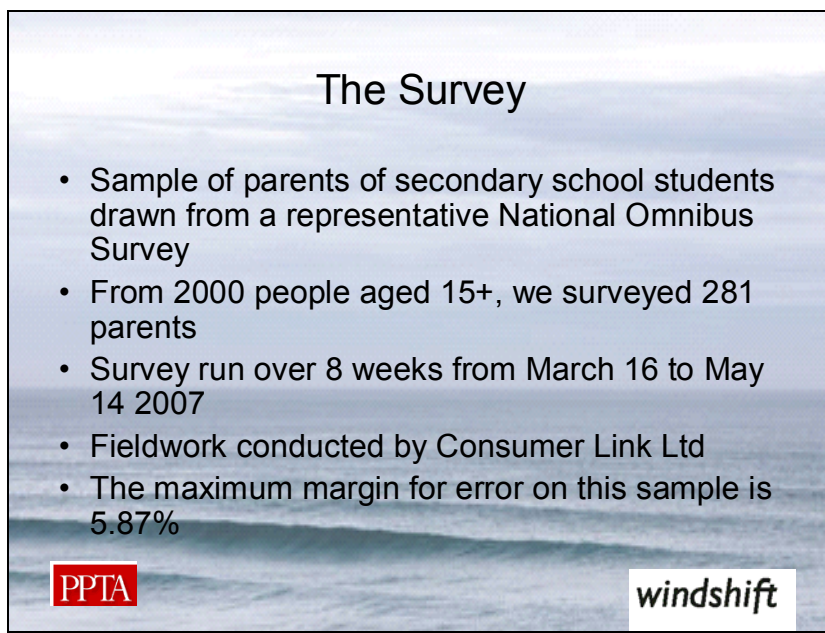
The overall objective of this research was to gain an understanding of parental attitudes towards the quality of education their children received, how they made choices about that education, their perceptions of teachers and the implications of that for the working conditions and future development of the teaching profession.

The focus groups each contained four to six people with children at secondary schools with a range of decile ratings [decile 3 to 10]. While some parents had had a number of choices of school, others came from areas with only one viable option. It was important to speak to parents with a range of different expectations of secondary school so parents were pre-screened to ensure that a range of values related to the role of secondary education was represented, specifically:-

- That students should learn practical skills
- That they should learn to think well and be exposed to important ideas
- That they should get the knowledge and skills they need to get to the top

In total, 21 parents were involved in the focus groups and 281 parents were extracted from the survey of 2000 people aged 15+. The characteristics of the survey sample are shown in Appendix 1.

As the slide below shows, the survey ran over 8 weeks. Interim results were provided at the half way stage and on completion the full data set was aggregated. These interim results gave us the opportunity to assess the “split-half” reliability of the questions. On almost every question there was very high correspondence between the answers provided by parents in the first four weeks compared to those in the second four weeks. This suggests that the underlying attitudes are relatively stable. The one question where this was **not** the case is noted in this report.



The Survey

- Sample of parents of secondary school students drawn from a representative National Omnibus Survey
- From 2000 people aged 15+, we surveyed 281 parents
- Survey run over 8 weeks from March 16 to May 14 2007
- Fieldwork conducted by Consumer Link Ltd
- The maximum margin for error on this sample is 5.87%

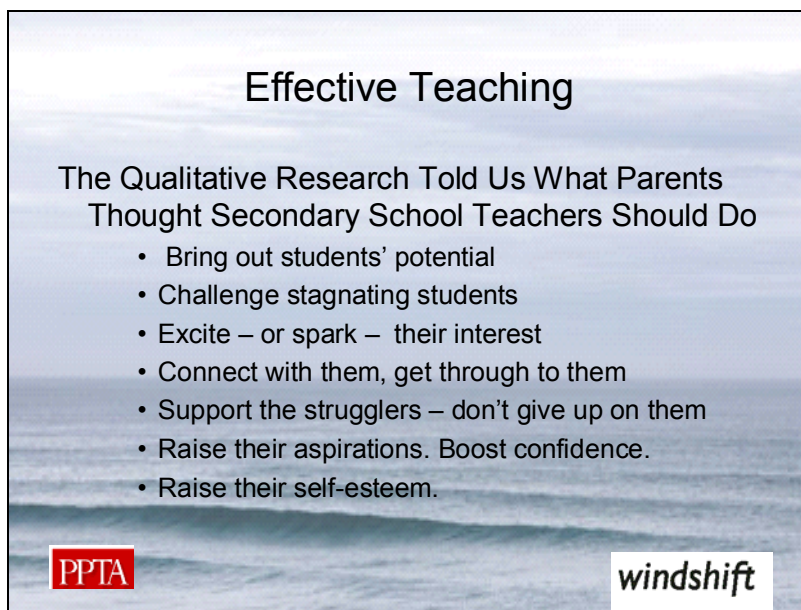
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Please note that in the survey, parents with more than one child currently at secondary school were asked to focus on the child with the next birthday when answering questions specific to a particular aspect of teacher, class or school conditions. In the focus groups parents would often compare and contrast the experience of different children in secondary school.

Section 1: Effective teaching

One of the key elements of this research was to explore the underlying expectations of teachers. What exactly are the qualities of an effective teacher?

The focus groups showed that parents place a strong emphasis on the teacher's ability to relate to the student – it was not so much a matter of putting knowledge into their heads, it was a matter of creating the conditions under which students could generate their own knowledge.



Effective Teaching

The Qualitative Research Told Us What Parents Thought Secondary School Teachers Should Do

- Bring out students' potential
- Challenge stagnating students
- Excite – or spark – their interest
- Connect with them, get through to them
- Support the strugglers – don't give up on them
- Raise their aspirations. Boost confidence.
- Raise their self-esteem.

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One of the focus group participants summed up the simple truth behind these results:-

“Everyone wants the best for their child”

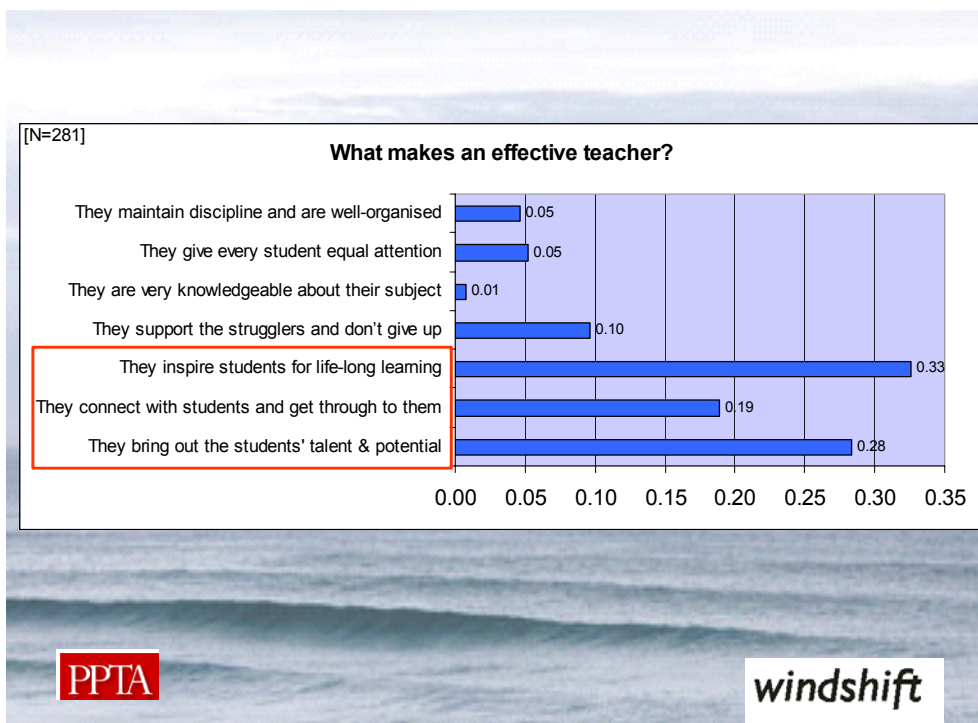
These parents all understood the difficulties of motivating teenagers to do things they didn't want to do – so they saw specialist skill in this area as extremely valuable. While they drew many parallels with the role of a sports or creative coach, they emphasised that the difference was that people in these latter roles dealt almost entirely with willing participants.

These parents shared a view that their children would have very different working lives than their own – with many more choices and opportunities. The desire and ability to learn and achieve was seen a primary skill for this emerging future. By necessity they felt, an effective teacher must

be on the wavelength of their students and know them well enough to help them achieve their potential.

In the subsequent survey, the general population of parents of secondary school students seemed to concur. **“Inspiring students for life long learning”** and **“bringing out their talents and potential”** were clearly the qualities that mattered most to a majority of parents.

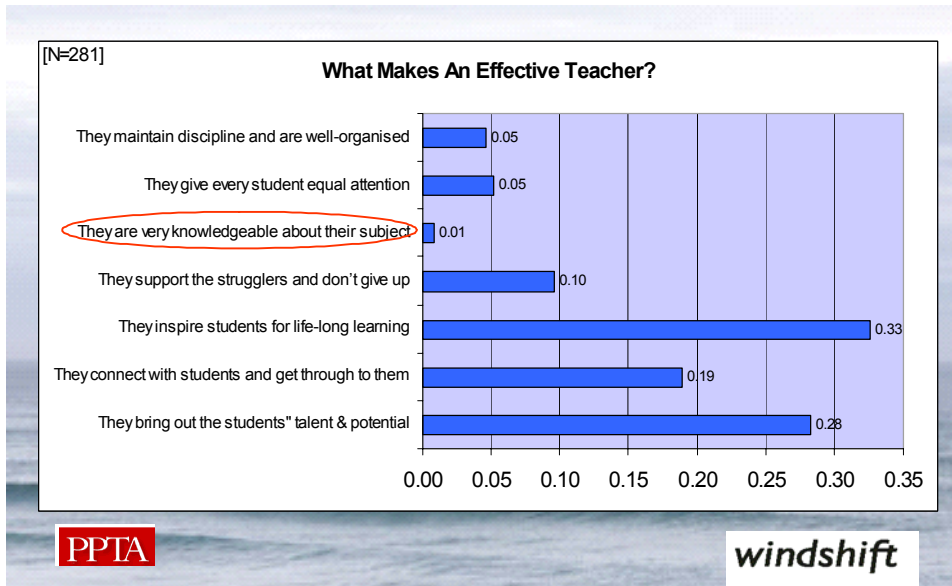
Figure 1: Here are some of the things that people have told us about what makes an effective secondary teacher. Which one matters most to you?



The Value of Specialist Subject Knowledge

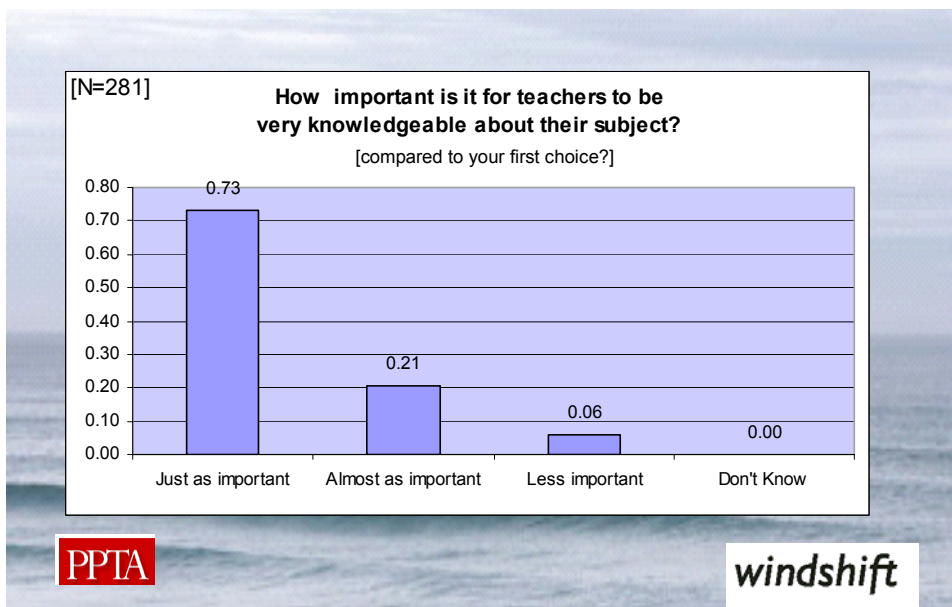
The issue of a teacher’s specialist subject knowledge is an interesting one. On one level it is clear that such knowledge is simply taken for granted. Few if any parents mentioned it in the focus groups and it was rarely given high priority by parents in the survey sample.

Figure 2: The value of specialist knowledge



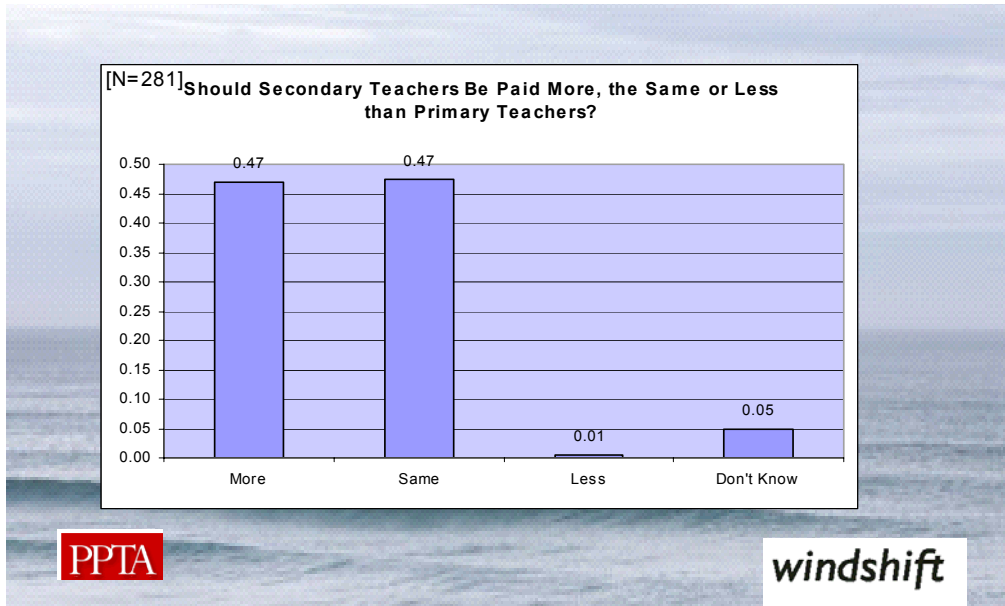
However, when asked specifically about the relative value of specialist subject knowledge, most acknowledged it to be as important or almost as important as the quality they had chosen.

Figure 3: Is subject knowledge really taken for granted?



Nevertheless, this specialist knowledge, whether or not it is taken for granted, does not automatically raise the status of secondary school teachers above that of the more generalist primary school teachers. As the graph below shows, the survey sample was evenly split between people who believed secondary teachers should receive more money than primary school teachers and those who believed they should be paid the same amount.

Figure 4: Should secondary teachers be paid more, the same or less than primary teachers?



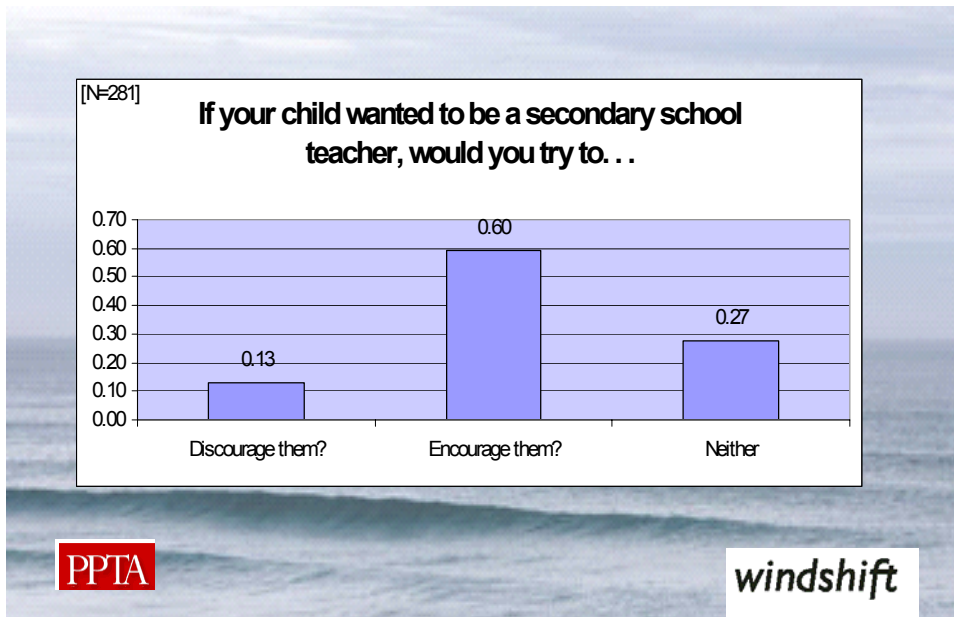
There are some insights from the focus groups that might shed light on these results. We found that, as far as their own children’s education is concerned, many parents seem to know far more about primary school teaching – when they were regularly co-opted to help or participate in their child’s education – than they do about contemporary secondary school teaching practice. They simply have no basis to judge who should receive more.

The primary reason for a general absence from, and ignorance of, the details of their child’s secondary schooling appears to be their child’s extreme reluctance to have them come anywhere near the place or to discover too much about what they do there. There are some things that just aren’t “cool” and having a parent know too much about what you do all day seems to be one of them for many teenagers.

Section 2: Quality and value

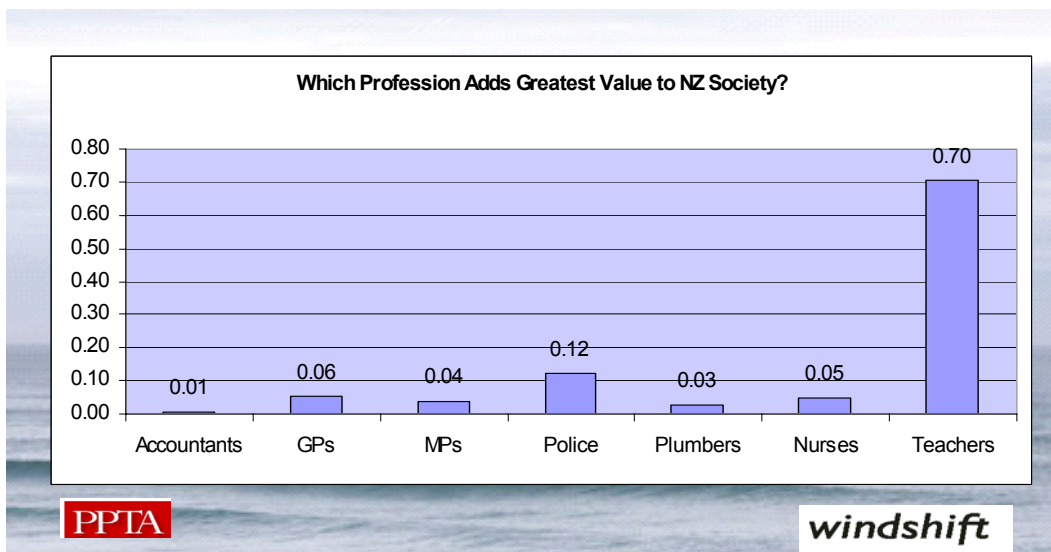
Whatever their concerns about the conditions under which teachers work to foster their child's talents or inspire them to life-long learning, the teaching profession is seen by a majority as a career they would encourage their child to pursue.

Figure 5: If your child wanted to be a secondary school teacher, would you try to ...

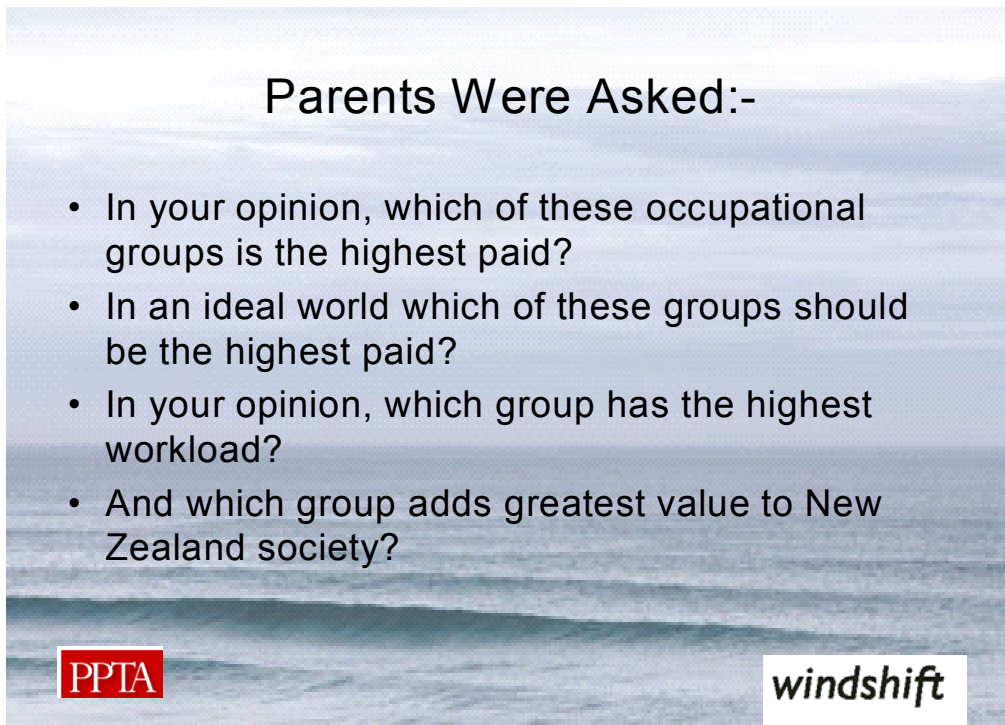


Teaching is seen as an important job – one of the most important as far as society is concerned.

Figure 6: Which profession adds the greatest value to NZ society?



To put these results in context, parents in both the focus groups and the survey were asked to rate a range of different professions in terms of their pay rates, their workload and their value.



Parents Were Asked:-

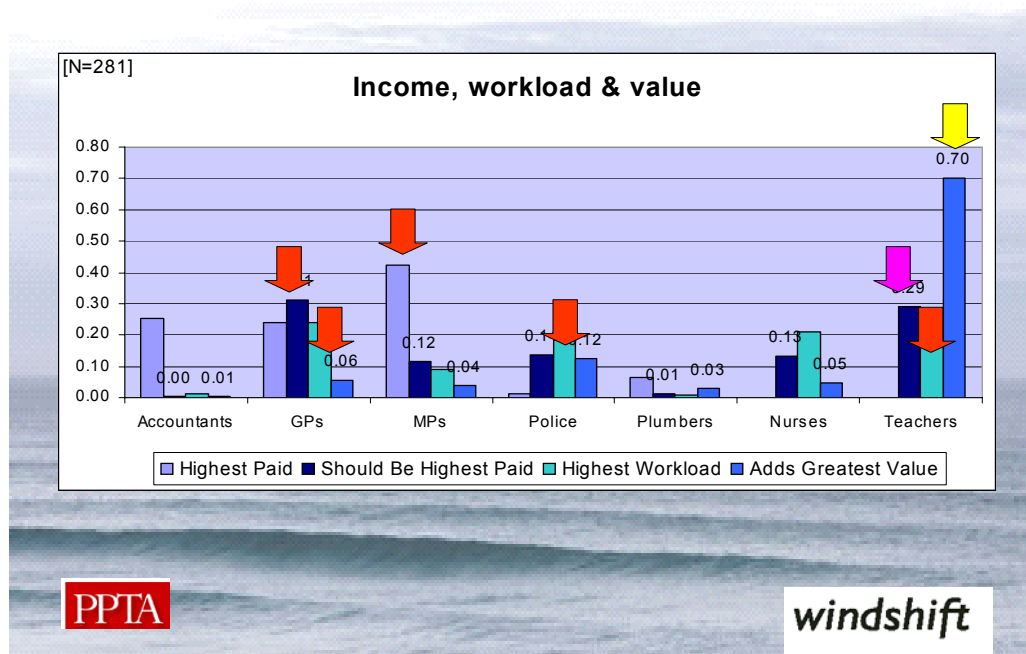
- In your opinion, which of these occupational groups is the highest paid?
- In an ideal world which of these groups should be the highest paid?
- In your opinion, which group has the highest workload?
- And which group adds greatest value to New Zealand society?

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Parents in the focus groups completed these questions individually, before they began their discussion – but they already knew they were going to discuss teaching, so cannot be said to be entirely unbiased. In the survey, these questions were asked towards the end of the questioning. The results therefore need to be seen as relative measures rather than absolutes and judged against each other. No doubt if we were doing a study of nursing, nurses would have done rather better. Even plumbers may have fared better from greater prior consideration of their value to society. The same may not be true of MPs or accountants.

The results of the survey response to these questions are shown overleaf. The survey results generally mirror the pattern of response in the focus groups. However the evidence which supports these beliefs is typically quite vague. Few people were very confident as to the actual amount that particular groups were paid. The perception of how much they **should** be paid seemed to result from a comparison of what benefit they were perceived to supply to people who used their services and how much training they had undergone to qualify for the job.

Figure 7: Income, workload and value



The key points to note are:-

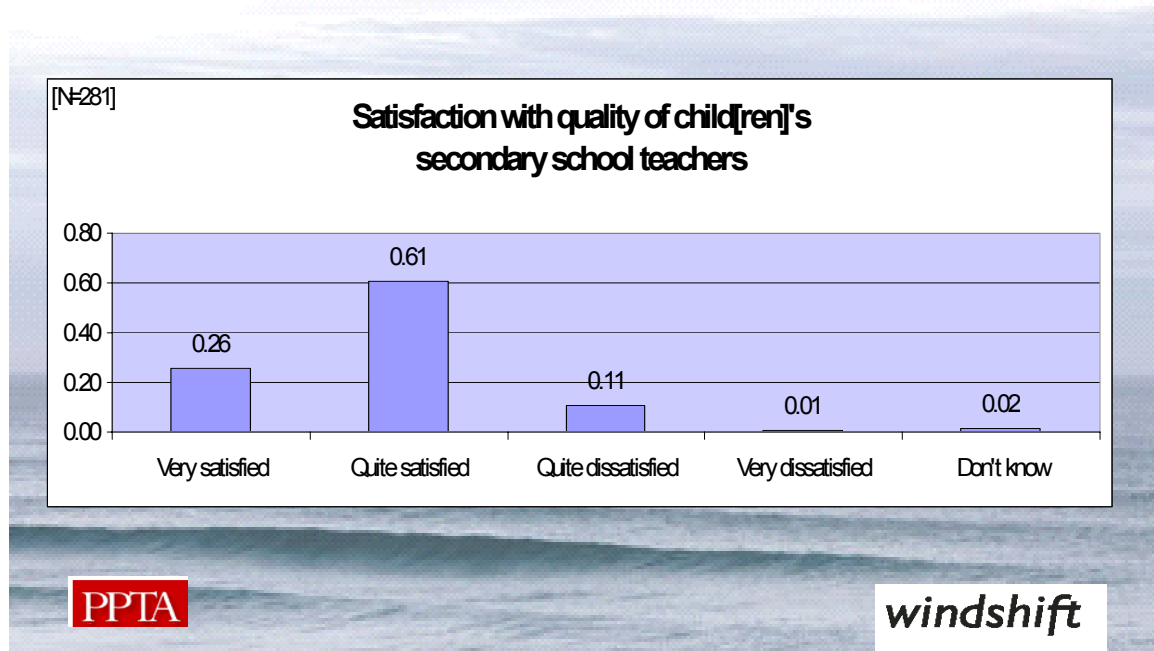
- MPs are generally regarded as being the highest paid – along with accountants and GPs
- GPs and teachers are the professions that **should be** highest paid – according to 60% of the sample
- The workload of teachers, GPs nurses and police is seen as being the highest.
- But, as we saw previously, teachers are more likely than any of these other professions to be seen as adding the greatest value to New Zealand society.

From the focus groups we formed the distinct impression that parents see the income of teachers as slightly higher than average, but an under-representation of their qualifications, workload and value. However, there was a strong view on the part of some parents that since a lot of people work hard, in the case of teachers there's little to be gained by special pleading on the basis of high workload alone.

Satisfaction with teacher quality

While a quarter of parents are **very satisfied** with their children's secondary school teachers, the majority are **quite satisfied**.

Figure 8: Overall, how satisfied are you with the quality of your child/ren's secondary school teachers?



Though anecdotally, focus group participants believe that the quality of their child's teachers ranges from the brilliant to the disengaged, the general view is that both brilliance and mediocrity are the extremes and that the vast majority of teachers are to be found somewhere between the two.

"At [school] there'd probably be two who are absolutely fantastic and one or two who shouldn't be there".

When asked in the focus groups, participants saw little value in creating a performance pay regime for teaching, not because they thought teaching practice shouldn't be evaluated and improved, but because no one could see how you could make such a system work fairly or efficiently. This was supported by their common belief that the mood, ability and interest level of the student are powerful determinants of their progress at school. The general perception among these parents was that learning is the responsibility of the student, aided by the teacher and supported by their family, rather than the teacher alone.

Concerns about working conditions

The concerns that parents do have over the **working conditions** of teachers can be seen as equally, concern over the **learning conditions** for their children. As the slide below implies, parents have a strong vested interest in ensuring that secondary teachers have what they need to be effective in their work – and to a lesser extent, in ensuring that the profession is one that they would be happy to have their children express interest in – as some already do,

Concern over Conditions

- Parents want secondary teachers to have what they need to effectively inspire and motivate their children
 - *“We need to make it a job that people want to do”*
 - *“Schools need to be places that people want to go to”*
- Concern that teacher effort is going in the wrong places
 - Controlling disruptive elements
 - Paperwork & bureaucratic requirements
- Concern about lack of males, lack of individual attention to their children, big class sizes

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They also have a vested interest in ensuring that schools are places people want to go to – because they want their children to want to go there, every day.

Concerns about class size

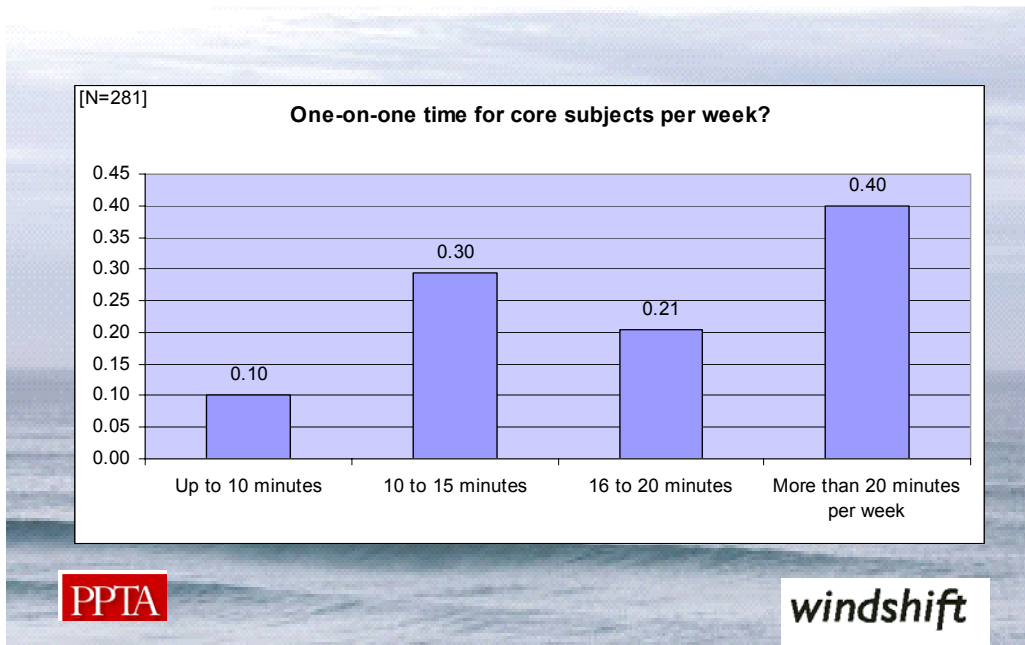
Given their underlying beliefs about the education their children need, it is unsurprising to find that many parents have fixed on class sizes as the ultimate symbol of the conditions under which teachers teach and children learn. As the graph overleaf shows, the numbers 20 and 25 have great pulling power when it comes to class size – though even 15 has some followers.

Figure 9: What is the most suitable class for your child?



Similarly, a large proportion of the sample believed that in terms of contact time, more was better than less.

Figure 10: How much one on one time would you want your child's English, Maths or Science teacher to spend with your child on average each week?



From the focus groups we found that almost every parent seems to think their child doesn't get as much attention as some other group – those who are cleverer, more successful, more disruptive, and slower to catch on. But unlike class size, there is no real consensus view as to how much attention is enough. There was quite a high degree of variability in these results between the first and second halves of the sample.

Disruption and distraction

Parents have absorbed two primary messages about the conditions under which teachers work:-

- First, that there is far too much “red tape” involved in the job of being a teacher – too many audit trails and bureaucratic requirements
- Second, that there is an increasing need to control disruptive students in the classroom

Both of these can be seen as taking away the attention of teachers from the core task of inspiring learning.

Red tape

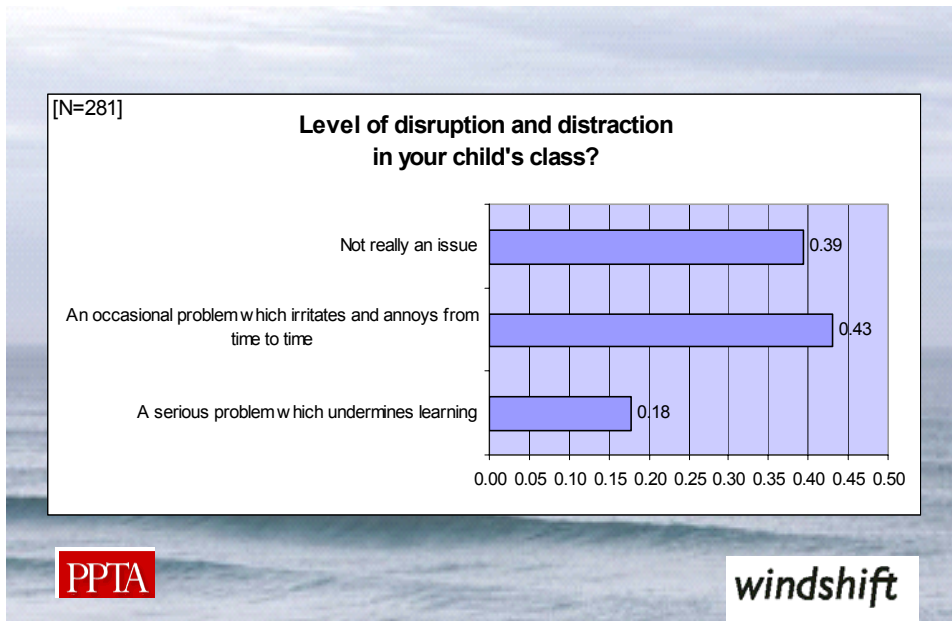
Though not pursued in the survey, the issue of the requirements of teachers to continually monitor student performance and produce statistics for the Board and the Ministry of Education did come up in some of the focus groups – especially where parents had knowledge of the functioning of Boards of Trustees. The core concern was that what is effectively clerical work was taking time away from teacher-student interactions – the parents' main preoccupation.

NCEA was generally believed to require a lot of form filling and assessment on the part of teachers, but it was not generally singled out in these groups as the primary source of this clerical work. Parents simply didn't know enough [or – to be honest - to care enough] about the life of a teacher to know the specific cause of this workload.

Classroom disruptions

In terms of the conditions under which teachers perform their services, a substantial minority [18%] believe their children's classes are seriously disrupted. Disruption is an issue for a majority [61%].

Figure 11: Thinking about the level of disruption and distraction day to day in your child's classes, would you say it is:



There's a general belief – evidenced in the focus groups – that these disruptions reflect failings on the part of both the child and their parents, but that the school and the teacher can manage these problems to a large extent.

The common impression parents have is of a group of “four or five” disruptive students in a classroom – people they regard as “discouraged” or unmotivated learners. The negative results of their behaviour are seen as teacher inattention to the “good” students and the distraction of anyone who isn't entirely focused on learning.

As the slide below shows, the opinion of focus group participants was that disrupters could be managed. They valued schools that “*jump on top of problems early*” and prevent anti-social behaviours like classroom disruption or vandalism from getting out of hand.

Effective Teachers Manage Disrupters

- *“There’s gangsters in my class”*
 - Common image of “four or five” disruptive children per class
 - General belief that these are discouraged learners or unsupported by parents
- A really effective teacher controls disrupters without giving them undue attention
- A really effective schools shuffles them out of classes they aren’t interested in

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Though time and budget constraints prevented us exploring issues of the school community in the survey, it was clear in the focus groups that parents were very appreciative of efforts by school staff to create a positive atmosphere in classrooms and to encourage a vibrant school culture which valued achievement and participation and created a wide range of choices for students.

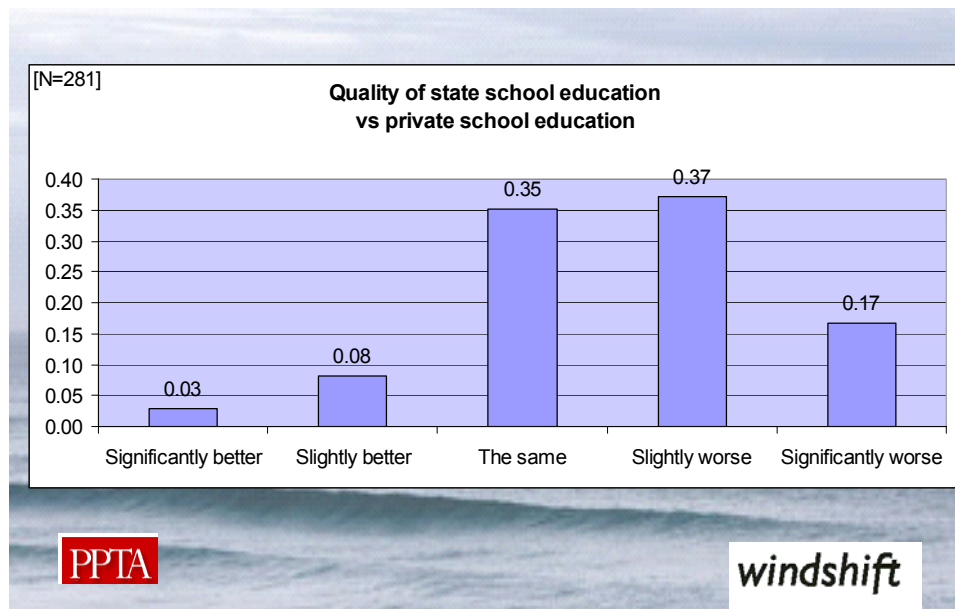
Section 3: The bigger picture

In the focus groups there was a general view that New Zealand’s public education system was up to world standard, though no specific evidence of statistical comparison came to mind. These large scale findings could also be diluted by personal examples [e.g. what my niece in Australia is doing in Year 10 compared to what my daughter is doing here].

Some parents in the focus groups had experienced private schooling with one or more of their children, but most had not. They were financially dependent on free education and unquestioning believers in a strong public education system. While some more concerned group participants could point to the United States and Australia as places where private schooling had undermined the public system, few others perceived any major threat to its continuation.

Nevertheless, private tuition was considered perfectly acceptable for children who needed extra help and the private school system – along with some of the higher decile zoned state schools – were seen as far better resourced. In the survey, parents were asked:

Figure 12: Comparing state secondary schools with private secondary schools do you think the quality of education in state schools is Significantly better, Slightly better, The Same, Slightly worse, Significantly worse than a private school education?



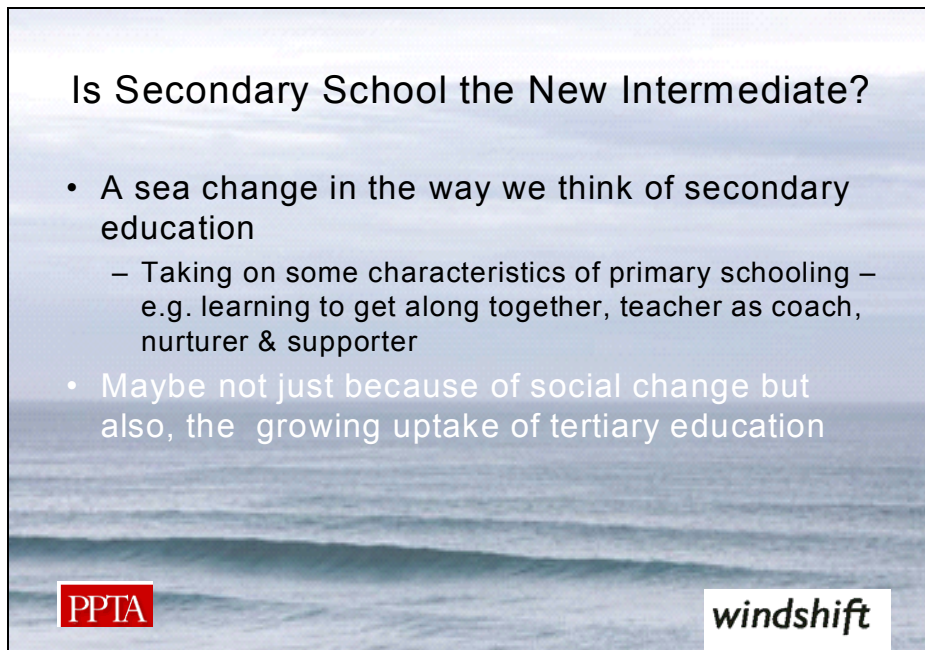
Over half [54%] believed the quality of state secondary school education was either slightly or significantly worse.

Towards the future

Among parents there's a fairly widespread view that the future of education will be '**High tech / High touch**' – with more and more use of information technology and remote instruction, but also greater 1:1 interaction between teachers and pupils, more individualised courses and a greater range of choices. In the light of this imagined future and the changes to parental expectations, it is interesting to consider how the profession itself might alter over time.

There seems to have been a change in the way that parents regard secondary education. Perhaps because of the expectation that most children will go on to some form of tertiary education, there seems less emphasis than one would have seen in the past on "filling up" on knowledge. There's more emphasis on learning good habits, building skills and developing positive attitudes.

In the past this expectation has been more closely associated with primary or intermediate level education rather than secondary schooling. Now, knowledge may be something specific a person acquires at tertiary level or from their own investigations as and when they need it. Learning to learn and to produce results – and being able to operate confidently – seems to be as important to parents as any specific skill or knowledge their children might require.



Is Secondary School the New Intermediate?

- A sea change in the way we think of secondary education
 - Taking on some characteristics of primary schooling – e.g. learning to get along together, teacher as coach, nurturer & supporter
- Maybe not just because of social change but also, the growing uptake of tertiary education

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With the growing complexity and fluidity of working life, the importance of learning and continuing to learn is increased. In the focus groups, parents seemed also to place higher emphasis on both

creativity and diversity of their children's experience - interacting easily with people of different cultures, being able to choose and personalise their learning, and being able to express themselves.

In such circumstances the salience of the teaching profession is greatly enhanced within wider society. Along with the arts and the communications industry it becomes a central conduit of knowledge and inspiration in what is becoming called the creative economy.

The Heart of the Creative Economy?

- A strong emphasis on teachers as uber-communicators & motivators
- Not that the profession should be dumbed down
 - Needs to re-emphasise its focus on cutting edge knowledge
- Potentially makes teaching a great training ground for the creative economy

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Learning the required “effective teacher” skills of communication, motivation and people management potentially makes teaching a great training ground for careers in the creative economy. Rather than being seen as a vocation and a job for life, it may become an essential starter career - something you come back to at various times across a diverse working life to refresh or re-learn.

The key stakeholders

Apart from teachers and pupils themselves, this group – the parents – reflects the primary community of interest for secondary school education in New Zealand. Though their sources of information are largely second-hand and they do not regard themselves as experts in the field, they care deeply about the quality and effectiveness of this system.

It is important to grasp that, to parents, there is no group better placed than teachers to keep them informed of the real health and value of the education system – in this case, the secondary school system. There's a degree of trust and a perceived independence accorded to teachers that few other groups engender – nurses are another perhaps.

Because teachers and pupils are perceived to have common interests in an effective working environment, there's a general belief among parents in the focus groups we conducted that teachers should take a stronger stand on issues related to the quality and level of resourcing of the school community.

With such obvious trust in the expertise of teachers it is important to “use your power for good” and to realise – as parents do – that the quality of New Zealand society depends on what teachers can make of the occasionally sulky, almost always self-centred, but generally quite nice children these parents have entrusted to you.

Appendix 1 – sample characteristics

As the table below shows, this sample has been re-weighted on the basis of age, sex and household size to be representative of the total NZ population

		AGE			
		TOTAL	15 to 29 years	30 to 49 years	50+ years
Q1 Do you have a child or children at college or secondary school?	Unweighted Base	2000	319	774	907
	Base	2000	518	784	698
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	Yes	281.0	4.0	238.0	39.0
		14.1%	0.7%	30.4%	5.6%
No	1719.0	514.0	546.0	659.0	
	85.9%	99.3%	69.6%	94.4%	

The students who experience was represented in the survey were distributed across Years 9 to 13 as follows:-

		AGE			
		TOTAL	15 to 29 years	30 to 49 years	50+ years
	Unweighted Base	267	2	221	44
	Base	281	4	238	39
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Q2 What year or form is this child in?	Year 9 / Form 3	52.0	-	47.0	5.0
		18.6%	-	19.7%	13.6%
	Year 10 / Form 4	59.0	-	50.0	8.0
		20.8%	-	21.0%	21.7%
	Year 11 / Form 5	67.0	1.0	58.0	8.0
		23.8%	29.9%	24.3%	19.5%
	Year 12 / Form 6	54.0	3.0	43.0	9.0
	19.4%	70.1%	17.9%	23.2%	
Year 13 / Form 7	49.0	-	41.0	9.0	
	17.5%	-	17.0%	22.0%	

Parents were not generally able to give the decile rating of their child’s school, which precluded it being used as a source of sample validation or in the interpretation of results. The final results were:-

	AGE			
	TOTAL	15 to 29 years	30 to 49 years	50+ years
Unweighted Base	267	2	221	44
Base	281	4	238	39
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Decile 1	4.0	-	3.0	1.0
	1.4%	-	1.3%	2.1%
Decile 2	4.0	-	3.0	1.0
	1.4%	-	1.3%	1.9%
Decile 3	7.0	-	6.0	1.0
	2.5%	-	2.7%	1.9%
Decile 4	8.0	-	3.0	5.0
	2.9%	-	1.5%	11.9%
Decile 5	11.0	-	11.0	-
	3.9%	-	4.6%	-
Decile 6	14.0	-	12.0	1.0
	4.8%	-	5.2%	3.0%
Decile 7	10.0	-	9.0	1.0
	3.6%	-	3.9%	2.1%
Decile 8	9.0	-	8.0	1.0
	3.3%	-	3.3%	3.3%
Decile 9	8.0	-	7.0	1.0
	2.7%	-	2.8%	2.1%
Decile 10	40.0	-	35.0	5.0
	14.3%	-	14.7%	13.6%
Don't know	166.0	4.0	140.0	23.0
	59.2%	100.0%	58.7%	58.3%

The gender breakdown of the sample was skewed slightly towards women as follows:-

		GENDER		
		TOTAL	Male	Female
	Unweighted Base	2000	908	1092
Q1 Do you have a child or children at college or secondary school?	Base	2000	962	1038
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	Yes	281.0	128.0	153.0
		14.1%	13.3%	14.8%
	No	1719.0	834.0	885.0
		85.9%	86.7%	85.2%

In terms of area, the distribution was as follows:-

		AREA							
		TOTAL	Auckland	Wellington	Christchurch	Other North Island Main Urban	Non Main Urban North Island	Other South Island Main Urban	Non Main Urban South Island
Q1 Do you have a child or children at college or secondary school?	Unweighted Base	2000	588	190	188	386	344	112	192
	Base	2000	645	205	182	362	319	112	175
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	Yes	281.0	87.0	28.0	29.0	34.0	60.0	15.0	27.0
		14.1%	13.5%	13.8%	16.1%	9.3%	18.9%	13.9%	15.5%
No	1719.0	559.0	177.0	153.0	328.0	259.0	96.0	148.0	
	85.9%	86.5%	86.2%	83.9%	90.7%	81.1%	86.1%	84.5%	

And the socio-economic distribution was as follows:-

		SOCIO-ECONOMIC LEVEL						
		TOTAL	1(High)	2	3	4	5	6 (Low)
Q1 Do you have a child or children at college or secondary school?	Unweighted Base	2000	132	294	608	466	210	290
	Base	2000	137	297	604	457	215	291
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	Yes	281.0	23.0	47.0	84.0	70.0	32.0	26.0
		14.1%	16.9%	15.8%	13.9%	15.2%	14.9%	8.9%
No	1719.0	114.0	250.0	520.0	387.0	183.0	266.0	
	85.9%	83.1%	84.2%	86.1%	84.8%	85.1%	91.1%	

Appendix 2 – Survey questions

- Q1. Do you have children at secondary school?
- Q2. What Year/Form Is [Child With Next Birthday] in?
- Q3 Here are some things people have told us about what makes an effective secondary teacher? Which one matters most to you?
- Q3b. And compared to this [the choice made at 3a] how important is it for the secondary school teacher to be very knowledgeable about their subject?
- .
- Q4. Should New Zealand secondary teachers be paid more than, the same or less than primary teachers?
- Q5 What is the decile rating of the school your child attends?
- Q6. Thinking about the level of disruption and distraction day to day in your child's classes, would you say it is?
- Q7. What do you think is the most suitable class size for your child?]
- Q8 How much one on one time would you want your child's English, Maths or Science teacher to spend with your child on average each week?
- Q9a In your opinion, which of these occupational groups is the highest paid?
- Q9b In an ideal world which of these groups should be the highest paid?
- Q9c In your opinion, which group has the highest workload?
- Q9d And which group adds greatest value to New Zealand society?
- Q10 If your child wanted to be a secondary school teacher would you try to:-
Encourage them Discourage them Neither
- Q11 Overall, how satisfied are you with the quality of your child[ren]'s secondary school teachers?
- Q12 Comparing state secondary schools with private secondary schools do you think the quality of education in state schools is significantly better, slightly better, the same, slightly worse, significantly worse than a private school education?