

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

## **Parents as consumers of school career information services: a survey of parent preferences**

### **Introduction**

Parents are a key partner and stakeholder in the delivery of career education and guidance within New Zealand secondary schools (Career Education in Practice, 2007; Career Education and Guidance in New Zealand Schools, 2003). However a recent review by the Education Review Office (2006) identified engagement of families and whanau as an area of weakness in secondary school career education and guidance provision. Many schools struggle, on limited time allowance and budget, to find effective and meaningful ways of engaging with parents and whanau.

In contrast there is evidence in the literature that parents and whanau rely on schools as a primary and readily accessible source of career information for themselves and their students (Bedson & Perkins, 2006; Trusty, Watts & Crawford, 1996). This may be particularly pertinent to families from lower socio-economic groups (Bedson & Perkins, 2006; Whiston & Keller, 2004; Kerka, 2000; Trusty & Watts, 1996). This suggests that parents and whanau are not just partners and stakeholders, but also consumers of school-based career information, education and guidance services.

Viewing parents as consumers of career information, the current study explored what sources of career information were important to parents of Yr 12 and 13 students in a rural, coeducational New Zealand secondary school. It went on to explore how knowledgeable these parents and caregivers of senior students were about the career information resources, career education programmes and events currently offered by the school, before asking what type of information they wanted to source from school and how they preferred to access it. It was hoped that the results of the study would provide some baseline data and recommendations for the school's careers department to use in evaluating and reviewing its current practice and planning for the future.

Parents have a pervasive influence on the career development of their children (Whiston and Keller, 2004). The literature shows that parental influence is complex and multidimensional (Way & Rossman, 1996). A range of career constructs, including: career exploration, career orientation, career identity, career self-efficacy,

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

career maturity, career interest, career aspiration, career attainment and occupational values and expectations are influenced by parents and family of origin (Bardick, Bern, Magnusson & Witko, 2005; Bryant, Zvonkovic & Reynolds, 2005; Taylor, Harris & Taylor, 2004; Whiston & Keller, 2004; Turner and Lapan, 2002; Kerka, 2000; Otto, 2000; Kracke, 1997; Way & Rossman, 1996).

Parental influence is linked to both family structure (i.e. income level, education level, occupational level, single/dual parents) and process variables (i.e. parenting style, openness of communication, expectations, warmth and responsiveness). There is growing support for the greater influence of process variables (Taylor, Harris & Taylor, 2004; Whiston & Keller, 2004; Kerka, 2000; Kracke, 1997; Way & Rossman, 1996).

Students perceive parents as their primary source of career information and advice (Bedson & Perkins, 2006; Bryan, Zvonkovic & Reynolds, 2005; Otto, 2000; Trusty, Watts & Crawford, 1996). Students indicate that they are most likely to approach their parents for information and advice and that they want to talk to their parents more about their career options. Perkins & Peterson (2005) found that students wanted their parents to become better informed and engage in supportive conversations.

In contrast studies on parent perceptions have identified that many parents lack confidence and feel uncertain and ill-equipped to help their student with their career exploration ( Bedson & Perkins, 2006; Bardick, Berns, Magnusson & Witko, 2005’ Taylor, Harris & Taylor, 2004; Trust, Watts and Crawford, 1996; Vick, 1996). Key concerns identified included lack of information about student career options and feeling conflicted about how much direct influence to exert. Taylor, Harris & Taylor (2004) found that parents adopted a passive role in their child’s career exploration for fear of infringing their developing independence. Vick (1996) found that parents were uncomfortable with playing a formative role as opposed to a supportive role in their children’s career development.

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

Literature on the socially constructed nature of career suggests that parents can not avoid having a formative influence by function of their ongoing relationship with the student, but that the influence is not unidirectional. Young, Marshall, Domene, Arato-Bolivar, Hayoun,, Marshall, Zaidman-Zait, Valach (2005) describe career as socially constructed through the joint and goal-directed actions and projects of parents and adolescents. Young, Valach, Paseluikho, Dover, Matthes, Paprosk and Sandey (1997) show that these actions and projects are embedded in and created by ongoing family functioning and relationship dynamics.

In career conversations parents and adolescents may participate in a range of joint actions including: accessing information, evaluating information, speculating, problem-solving and clarifying behaviour or meaning. Young et. al. (1997) refer to the importance of parent and adolescent sharing enough ‘common ground’ (Shotter, 1993, in Young et. al. 1997) to sustain the conversation, pointing to the risk of conversations being stymied when they have exhausted parental knowledge or resources. Bedson and Perkins (2006) found a link between parental knowledge and confidence and the likelihood that they will initiate career conversations with their adolescent. They found that parents with more education were more likely to have talked to their adolescent about career. They went on to suggest that those adolescents who do not get this support from their parents may be disadvantaged in terms of their career development. Kerka (2000) found that where parental support and guidance was absent, adolescents were more likely to ‘flounder’ - demonstrate an inability to develop and pursue a specific career focus.

A number of studies have demonstrated the efficacy of group and individual interventions with parents in lifting not only parental confidence and knowledge but achieving improved outcomes for students on a range of career constructs ( Bedson & Perkins, 2006; Whiston & Keller, 2004; Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003; Amundsen & Penner, 1998; Way & Rossman, 1996). Training parents in the use of key career information sources is a common component in all these interventions. Many authors (Bedson & Perkins, 2006; Whiston & Keller, 2004; Turner & Lapan, 2002) also recommend the value of addressing some of the process factors linked to better student career development outcomes such as how to communicate about

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009  
by Tess Livingstone  
careers and how to provide support and encouragement for career exploration activities.

### **Methodology**

A descriptive survey method was used for this study. The aim of the study was to discover and describe parental preferences in relation to school-provided career information.

#### *Instrument*

A self-administered, anonymous questionnaire was developed for use in this study. The first section - preferred sources of information - explores the importance to parents of their student's school as a source of career information and advice. Section two - school career services - explores parent awareness and knowledge of existing school-based career information resources, career education programmes and career related events. The final section - parent preferences - asks questions about what level of support parents want from school in terms of career information and advice, what they want more information about and how they want to access this support and information. The final open questions give parents the opportunity to identify current helpful practices and make suggestions about improvements

#### *Sample*

The total population of parents and caregivers of Yr 12 and 13 students at a rural, New Zealand, Decile 5 coeducational school make up the sample in this study. In total 128 surveys were mailed out to parents and caregivers. Limited demographic details about the population can be deduced from student information held by the school and the decile ranking of the school. For example of the Yr 12 and 13 student population 83% are European; 12% are Maori, 1% Pacific Islander and 4% Other ethnicity. It was decided to survey parents of Yr 12 and 13 students as these students and their families could be expected to have some experience of the school career information, education and guidance services and also that they were more likely to be engaged in active decision-making regarding post-school destinations.

#### *Procedure*

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

The questionnaire was mailed out to all parents and caregivers of Yr 12 and 13 students at the school. The mail out corresponded with distribution of the school’s subject selection material. It was thought that parents were more likely to be actively engaged in career conversations with their student around this time and therefore more motivated to complete the questionnaire.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Respondents*

Thirty four parents/caregivers returned completed survey forms giving a response rate of 26.6%. Of those that responded 75% were female and 25% male. Seventy-nine percent of respondents identified themselves as New Zealanders, 18 % as European and 3% as Maori. Sixty-percent of respondents had a Yr 12 student at the school, 36% had a Yr 13 student at the school and 3% had both a Yr 12 and Yr 13 student at the school. Seventy-three percent had an older child who had already left school, leaving 27% of respondents as first-time parents of senior students getting ready to transition from school.

### Section One: preferred sources of career information

#### Question 1

*‘Please rank the following in order of importance to you as a source of career information and advice (please rank from 1-most important to 9-least important)’*

### **Figure One: Parent mode rankings of career information sources in order of perceived importance**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mode ranking</b>
School	1
Training providers	2
Career expos	3
Internet sources	5
Employers	5
Government agencies	5

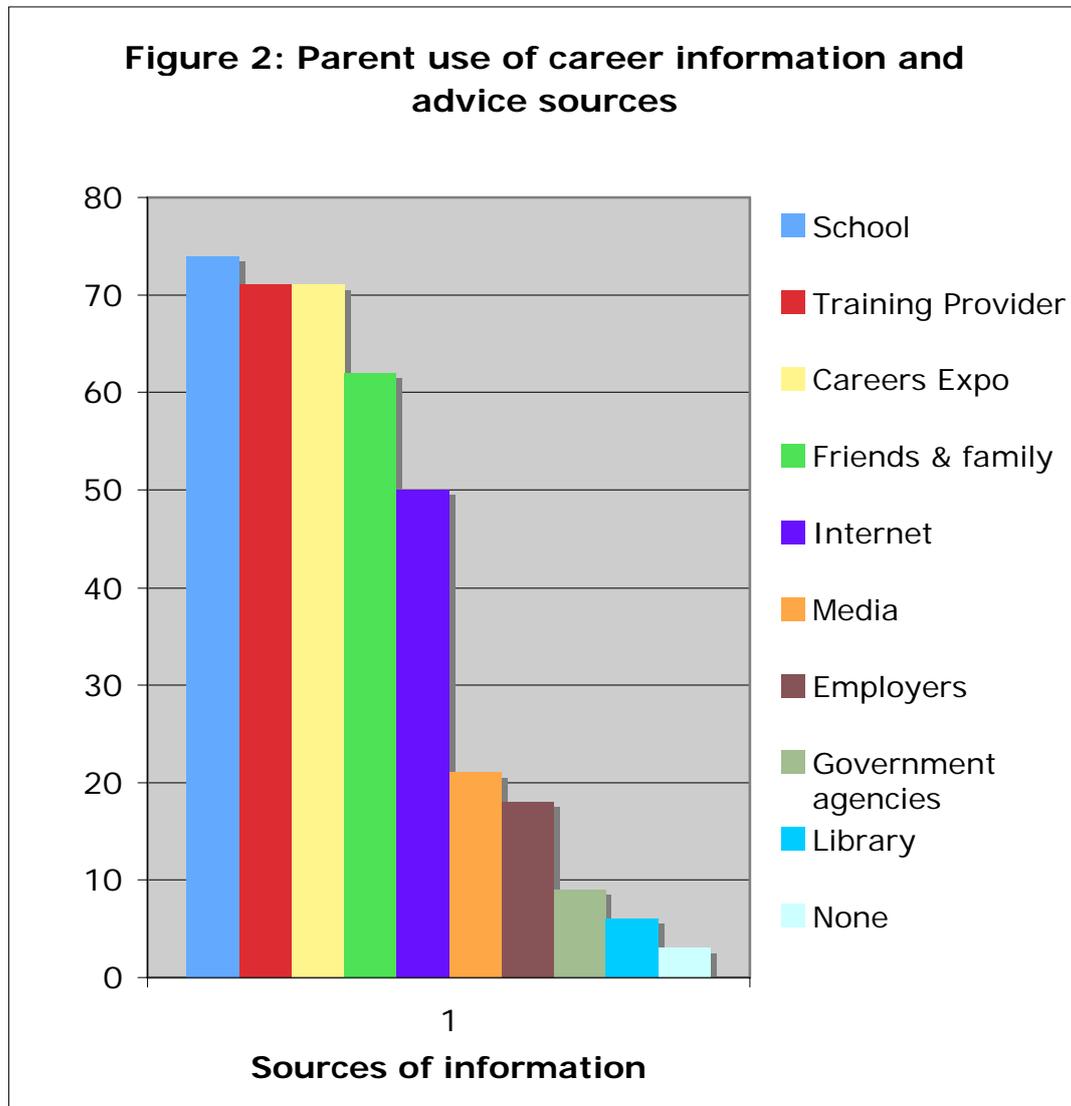
“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009  
by Tess Livingstone

Media	6
Friends and family	7
Library	9

School was the source of career information and advice perceived as ‘most important’ by respondents in this study (mode average ranking of 1). This was followed by training providers (2) and career expos (3).

Question 2

‘Which of the following have you actually used to source career information and advice?’



The highest proportion of parents (74%) had ‘actually sourced’ career information and advice from school. A similar proportion (71% respectively) had sourced

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

information from a training provider or careers expo. These more popular actual sources of information correspond with the top ranked items in terms of perceived ‘importance’ in question one. However 62 % of parents had sourced information and advice from friends and family. This contrasts with a mode ranking of 7 (less important) in question one. This could suggest that while parents do not perceive the advice and information gained from friends and family as important, it is a readily accessed source of information. An alternative view is that the spread of rankings for friends and family was more varied than for other items which could reflect a variety of family and friendship variables including; warmth, geographic closeness and openness of communication. Fifty percent of parents had actually sourced information from the internet. Only 9 % of parents indicated that they had sourced information from a Government agency. While this may reflect a lack of awareness that some of the resources they have used (such as websites, Team-Up magazine) are Government funded, this still has implications for public awareness of where to go for assistance with career and educational planning.

The finding that this school is both perceived by parents as a primary source of career information and advice and used most frequently as an ‘actual source’ of information is consistent with the literature (Perkins & Peterson, 2005; Trusty & Watts, 1996; Trusty, Watts and Crawford, 1996). The confidence and reliance indicated by these findings suggest that the school has an opportunity and responsibility to carefully consider the needs and preferences of parents and how it can best cater to these.

## Section Two: School Career Services

### Question 4

*‘Do you know who the career advisor is in this school?’*

Three quarters of respondents (76%) reported that they knew who the careers advisor was in the school. Leaving 24% of respondents who did not know.

Those respondents who did not know who the careers advisor was were more likely than those who did, to: not know where the careers office was located in the school;

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone  
 not recognise any of the listed career information resources and identify someone other than the careers advisor as a source of career information and advice in the school.

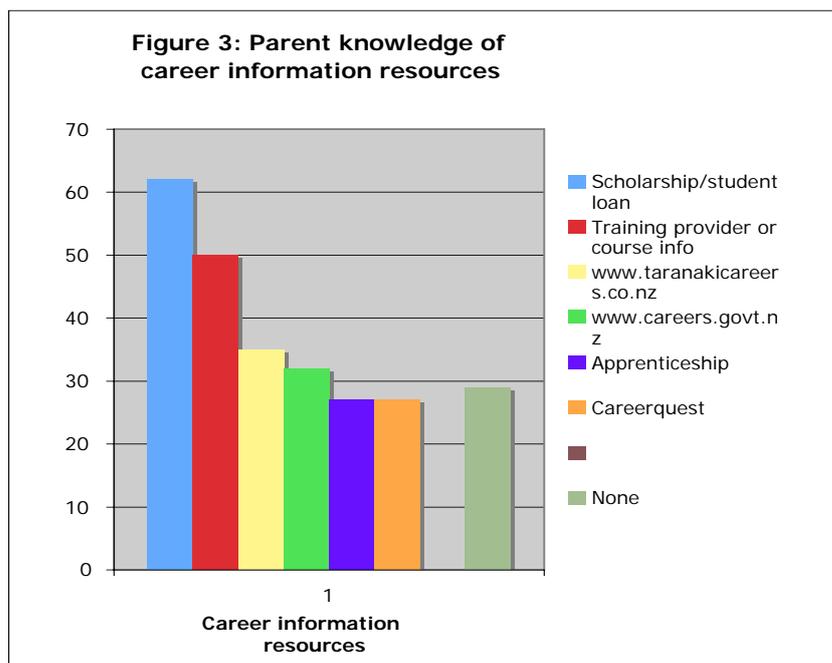
Question 5

*‘Do you know where the career office is in this school?’*

Just over half (53%) of the parents and caregivers in this survey knew where the careers office was located in the school. Again this raises the questions of how knowledge of where the career office is located may be linked to parent awareness of and access to the career resources – information and personnel - located there.

Question 6

*‘Which of the following career information resources are available at this school?’*



Close to one third (29%) of respondents identified that they were unaware of any of the career information resources identified in this question. Scholarship and student loan information was the resource most frequently identified (62%), followed by training provider and course information (50%). Only 27% identified the availability of apprenticeship information.

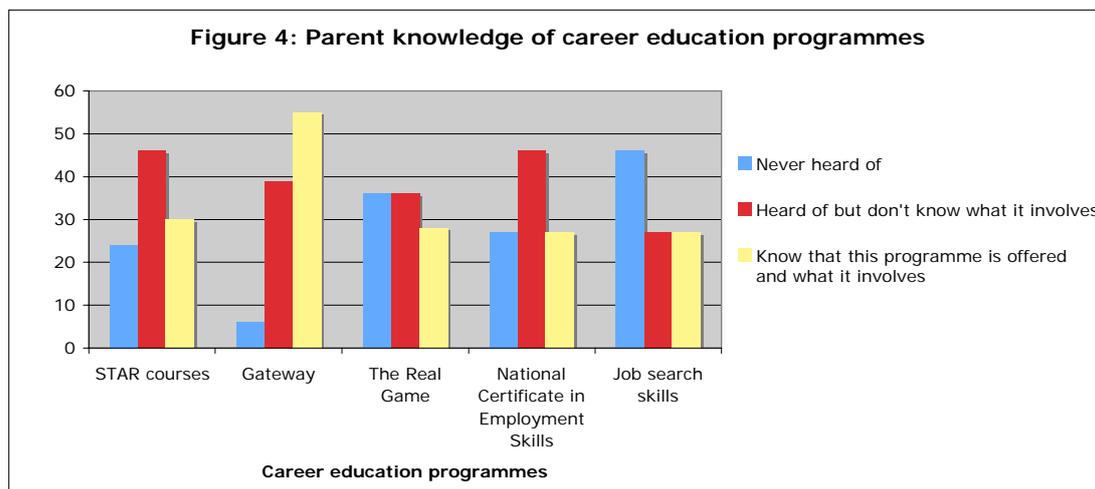
“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

It is interesting to note the greater parent awareness of specific information such as scholarship and student loan information and tertiary training information and the relatively low awareness of career exploration aids such as the websites and Careerquest. This would reflect Bardick, Berns, Magnusson and Witko’s (2005) finding of the preference parents of senior students reported for more specific information.

Awareness of most of the common career information and guidance resources available in schools was relatively low among respondents in this study. Without knowledge of what resources are available parents may lack the motivation or confidence to make contact themselves for support or refer their student. It is important to note that awareness of the resource does not equate to use of the resources. Further, Bardick et. al. (2005) comment that it is important to not assume that knowledge of resources also means that parents understand the usefulness and effectiveness of a resource.

Question 7

‘How much do you know about the following career programmes operating in this school?’



Respondents in this study felt most knowledgeable about The Gateway Programme (55% reported they knew what this programme involved). Close to 70% of respondents reported having little to no knowledge of the remaining career education programmes including: STAR (Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resources) courses

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone (69%), The Real Game Yr 10 module, National Certificate in Employment Skills (NCES) and specific job search modules and activities (all 72%).

Parents reported low awareness of the one career education programme mandatory to all junior students – The Real Game. It is possible that parents have forgotten about this programme in the two to three years since its delivery to their students in Yr 10.

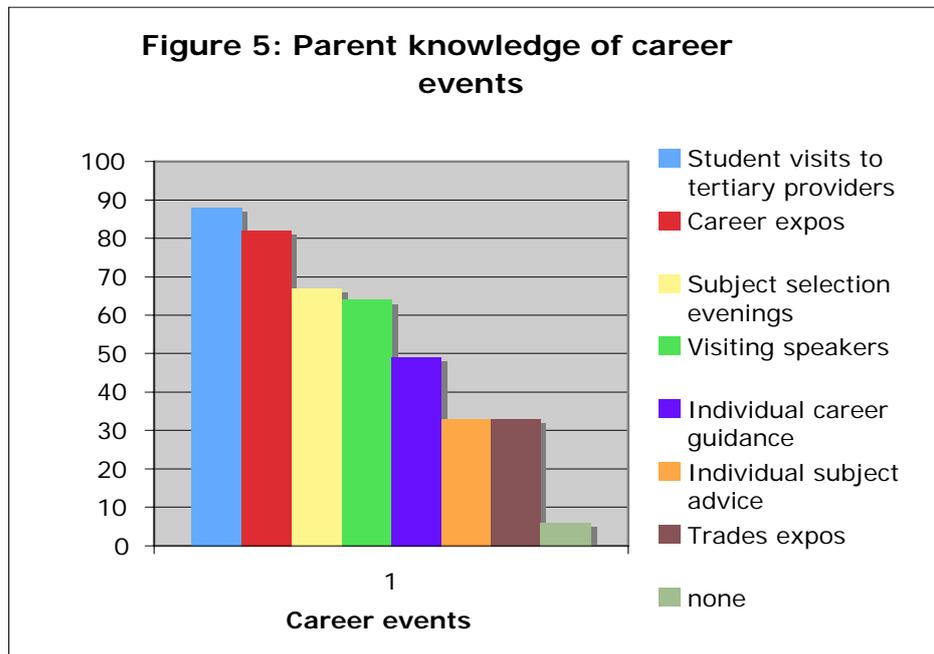
Also of interest is that the Gateway programme enjoys a higher profile among parents in this study than STAR programmes, when STAR is potentially relevant to a wider student population.

It is not surprising that a large proportion of parents (45%) had no knowledge of job search education programmes as these tend to be delivered within other specialised programmes (such as Gateway and the National Certificate in Employment Skills) or in small group/individual settings and have are thus not promoted as a discrete programme.

Parent awareness of career education programmes may be influenced by their student’s learning pathway within the school – i.e. whether they are participating in the Gateway programme, a STAR course or NCES course. This would imply a greater proportion of parents with students in the Gateway programme responded to the survey. However this would not explain the low awareness of the mandatory Real Game programme. Another possible explanation is the degree to which a programme requires parental action and involvement. For example the Gateway programme requires parents to attend a screening interview with their student and agree to the student being placed in a workplace setting. STAR courses may involve students learning in other training provider settings. This often requires parental permission. The remaining programmes are delivered in school time onsite and may involve little school-home communication or parent action. If this is the case it may be possible to improve parent awareness by increasing school-home communication about these in-school programmes and incorporating a parental involvement component.

Question 8

“Which of the following career events do students at this school attend?”



The career events that parents and caregivers in this survey were most aware of are student visits to tertiary providers (88%) and career expos (82%). These results correspond with the results from question one and two where respondents indicated that tertiary providers and career expos both ranked highly in terms of perceived importance and as actual sources of information and advice. A significant number of respondents reported being aware of subject selection evenings (67%) and visiting speakers to the school (64%). Nearly half of respondents knew about the availability of individual career guidance interviews with fewer indicating awareness of events such as trades expos (33%) and individual subject advice interviews (33%).

There appears to be generally higher parent awareness of career events when compared with information resources and career education programmes. In addition those events which involve the student accessing information in settings outside the school seem to have higher parent awareness (apart from trade careers expos). This trend may highlight the importance to parents of the school’s role in brokering access to these settings and opportunities. Alternatively, as with the Gateway programme, this may be a function of required parental action. In the case of trips to expos and training providers, parental permission and payment of associated costs is usually

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone  
sought. Lindner (2004) suggests that as the expectation for parent involvement in school increases so does the quantity and quality of school-home communication. Further research is needed to examine the differences in school-home communication practices in relation to resources, programmes and events requiring parent involvement and those that don't.

The relatively low respondent awareness of trade expos (despite there being trade expos held in two neighbouring local authority areas each year) is in concert with the relatively low awareness of information resources on apprenticeships in question six. This raises a question about whether this reflects promotion and profile of resources and events supporting trade careers within the school or parental expectation and interest related to trades pathways.

### Section three: parent preferences

#### Question 9

*‘Would you like more/ the same amount/ less career information from this school?’*

Close to three quarters (74%) of respondents to this question indicated they wanted more career information from school. No respondents wanted ‘less’ information and 26 % indicated they wanted ‘the same amount’.

It is interesting to note here that 73% of respondents in this survey have older children who have left school and transitioned to work, further training or other destinations. Despite this ‘experience’ factor parents and caregivers still want more information and support from school to assist their current senior student.

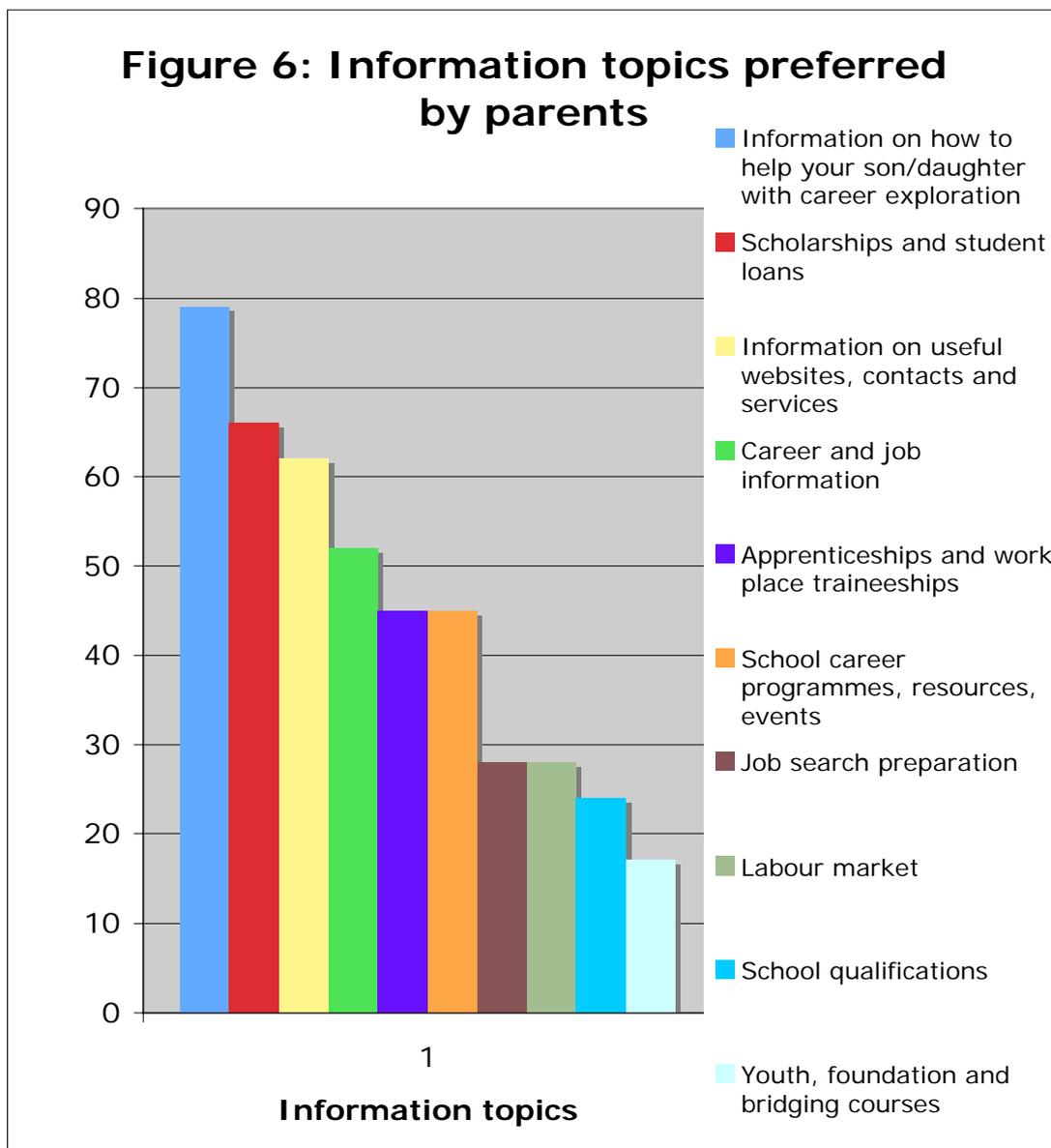
Parents’ desire for more information is consistent with the literature (Bedson and Perkins, 2006; Perkins and Peterson, 2005; Bardick et. al. 2005; Vick, 1996). In a review of the New Zealand literature on home-school partnerships Bidulph, Bidulph and Bidulph (2003) concluded that when students reach secondary school many parents need guidance about how to help their student at home, and how to access

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

information and services. Perkins and Peterson (2005) also found that parents wanted more information from schools. Parents in Vick’s 1996 study felt frustrated with what they considered the narrow range of career information available from school and difficulty finding and accessing appropriate staff and personnel to respond to their inquiries and concerns.

Question 10

‘What type of information would you like more of?’



“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

Asked what type of information they would like more of, 79% of parents and caregivers in this survey indicated they want more information on how to help their son/daughter with career exploration.

Parents’ desire for more information on how to help their student with career exploration is supported by the literature that finds that parents often lack confidence and feel uncertain about how best to help their adolescent (Bedson & Perkins, 2006; Perkins & Peterson, 2005; Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003; Taylor, Harris & Taylor, 2004; Trusty, Watts & Crawford, 1996, Vicks, 1996). This need calls for an educative as well as an informative response. The literature (Perkins & Peterson, 2006; Bedson & Perkins, 2005; Whiston & Keller, 2004; Taylor, Harris & Taylor, 2004; Amundsen & Penner, 1998) Way & Rossman, 1996; Young & Friesen, 1992 ) points to the effectiveness of a range of educative interventions in raising parental confidence and efficacy in relation to supporting the career development of their adolescent. These in turn result in improved outcomes on a range of career constructs for students. As well as demonstrating key career information resources these programmes also focus on the family process variables linked to student career development including promoting open communication, and supportive and responsive relationships (Whiston & Keller, 2004, Kerka, 2000; Way & Rossman, 1996).

Information on scholarships and student loans was the next most sought after information (66%) followed by information on useful websites, contacts and services (62%). While this item combines websites and referrals to organisations and services it highlights the value of the role of the school in brokering access to non-school entities and information. This result may also indicate an interest for a proportion of respondents in improving their knowledge and use of internet resources.

Over half of respondents wanted more career and job information (52%). More information on school career programmes, resources and events; and apprenticeships and work place traineeships was sort after by 45% of respondents respectively. This would reflect the generally low awareness of these items in previous questions and highlight areas where further communication and promotion may be needed.

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

Fewer parents wanted more information on tertiary training providers which may reflect the already high awareness and use of related resources and events.

Relatively few parents wanted information on job search preparation (28%), labour market information (28%) and youth, foundation and bridging courses (17%).

### Question 11

*‘How would you like to receive this information?’*

While 19 respondents to this question ranked the items in order of preference, 13 checked the items they favoured as a delivery mode. Consequently there are two sets of results for this question.

For those who ranked their preferences, individual face-to face interview was the mode of communication preferred by most parents followed by school newsletter and printed material in the post. Parent evenings was the fourth most preferred mode.

Printed material in the post (77%) and the school newsletter (62%) were also the most popular options for those respondents who indicated their preferences by ticking the boxes. Email contact (46%) and individual face-to-face interview (31%) were the next most frequently ticked items.

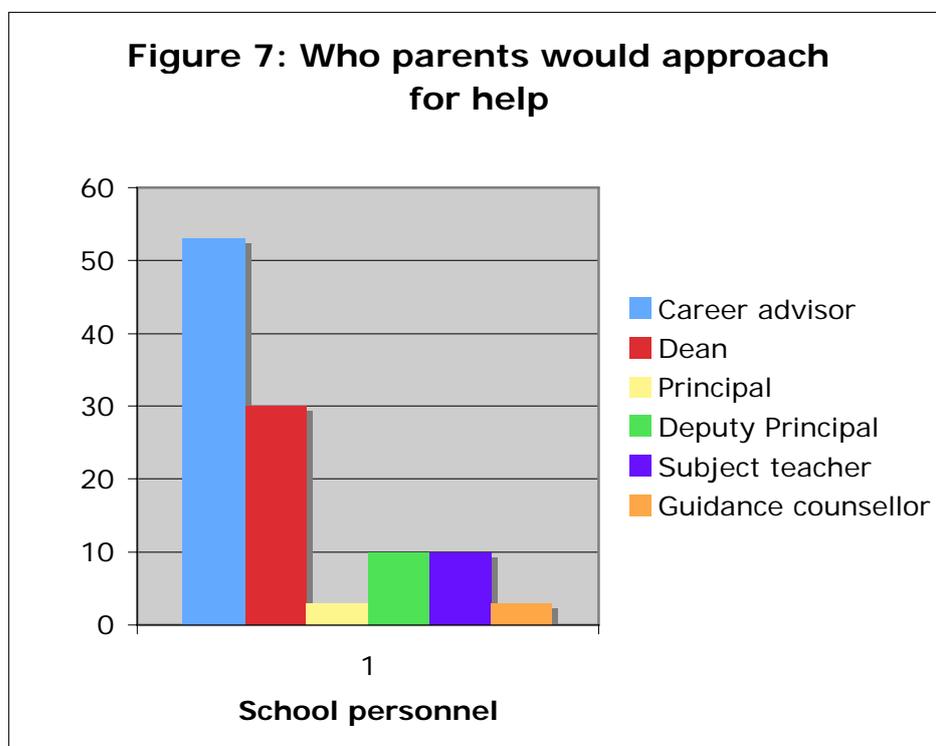
The responses to this question show that parents value a range of communication strategies. These may vary according to personal preference, experience and topic/purpose. Similar studies have also found support for schools adopting multiple communication modes (Kervin, 2005; Lindner, 2004; Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003). May (1998), Gysbers et. al. (1998) and Watts (1996) all promote the importance of career professionals maintaining good quality career information resources in multiple formats to suit client need. Bedson & Perkins (2006) found that 90% of the parents who participated in their parent seminars still wanted the opportunity to talk to someone individually about their child’s transition needs. Individual face-to face contact, particularly informal contact, is a key strategy

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

identified in literature on the effective engagement of parents in education (Gorinski & Faser, 2006; McKinley 2002 ; Clinton,, Hattie & Dixon, 2007; Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003). Lindner (2004) found that parents felt they received superior information in informal face-to-face interactions than in written form and that teachers were more open and honest in these settings. In summary Kervin (2005) found that parents wanted information sources to be varied, frequent and timely.

### Question 12

*‘If you had a concern or question about your student’s career development, who in the school, would you be most likely to approach for help?’*



Just over half of respondents (53%) would approach the career advisor for help if they had a question or concern about their student’s career development. Almost one third (30%) would approach the student’s Dean while 10% of respondents would each approach the deputy principal or a subject teacher.

These results suggest that while many parents would seek career information and advice from the career specialist in the school, a significant number would look for it from other personnel. This raises potential questions about quality, consistency,

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

accuracy and professional ethics in relation to careers advice provided by multiple personnel in the school. Of note is the finding that those parents and caregivers who do not know who the career advisor is (24% of respondents) are much more likely to seek advice from other personnel.

### Open Questions

The responses to the open questions generally corresponded with the results from the questions in section three on parent preferences. Parents clearly value the school’s potential to provide individual and customised information; provide a steer through the volume of available information and to broker access to key non-school organisations and personnel. Access and communication are recurring themes as is an appreciation of school-initiated contact. Parents who are feeling cautious of exerting too much influence; or anxious about a lack of knowledge may need to be ‘invited’ by the school to engage in dialogue around their student’s career exploration activities. Comments about the need for a programmed and structured approach may be linked to a need to have an overview of the career education and guidance programme in the school. This would counteract the experience of fragmentation as ‘bits’ of information find their way home.

### Implications

The parents in this study want to be treated as consumers of the career services located in the school. As such they not only want to source information to help their student, they want the school to support and educate them in how to make best use of the resources and how to help their student with career exploration. Whiston and Keller (2004) concluded that there was a psychoeducator role for career practitioners in schools which involved educating parents about their pervasive influence, teaching them how to access and use career resources, teaching them career related communication and interpersonal skills and augmenting family resources with appropriate referrals to relevant agencies and services. There are associated implications of appropriate levels of both public and school-based funding and time allowance to allow school careers staff to expand their delivery to parents.

“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

The study has highlighted a need for the school to consider how it can better promote and communicate with parents about its career information resources and career education programmes. Any resulting communication strategy needs to incorporate and maintain multiple portals including: personal contact, print material and group delivery. Supporting parents to use and apply the growing information resource available on the internet, is another need highlighted by the study. Finding ways to incorporate some form of parental action in in-school career education activities may serve to lift parental awareness of these activities as well as support parents to have key career discussions with their students at home. There was some evidence in this study that information on apprenticeships and trade careers had a low profile in the school, yet nearly half of the respondents in the study wanted information on these pathways. Parents indicated a desire for structured, regular and repeated communication and school initiated personal contact. Nearly half of the parents indicated they would source career help from someone other than the careers advisor. This has implications in terms of professional development for those staff identified as key alternative advisors.

While the current study provides some limited baseline data on the knowledge and preferences of parents of its senior students, the school needs to consider how it will continue to consult with its parent community. In addition, any future interventions need to be evaluated in terms of outcomes for parents and ultimately for students.

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“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

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``Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences'' A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

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“Parents as Consumers of School Career Information Services: a survey of parent preferences” A Presentation to CPANZ Career Research Symposium February 2009 by Tess Livingstone

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