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Choice of schooling: A qualitative view

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Abstract: *The issue of choice of schooling in Australia has remained important since the arrival of the first European settlers in 1788. More recently the issue has been influenced by the increase in Federal funding in the private sector that has had the effect of extending the family's ability to makes choices about education. There have been a variety of community reactions to such choices and so quality research into this particular issue is of prime importance if balance is to be maintained in the debate. This paper presents the results of a qualitative research study where grounded theory was used to discover the meaning behind the choices that families make about education. Their underlying concern, the process of decision-making, and the overall focus of their actions are all theoretically presented. Grounded theory methodology provided a rigorous framework for the analysis of the data collected from families in both metropolitan and country areas and from government and non-government schools. The resultant theory will offer an interesting background to the public/private debate and to the relevant merits of each area of schooling, as education is increasingly perceived as a purchasable commodity.*

Educational Choice in Western Australia

Educational choice has been a concern for Western Australian parents since the beginning of European settlement. Parallel systems have been present since the first days of the settlement and this has provided a stimulus both financially and educationally for the systems to flourish and be advantageous for the needs and variety of forms necessary in our pluralist society. In more recent times, educational choice has expanded through the injection of Federal and State funding into the non-government sector. The most rapidly growing area of this sector is the non-Catholic denominational schools that are medium fee charging so that now over 30% of children in Western Australia are educated outside the government system (National Catholic Education Commission 2001).

In this paper schooling will be described as being either government or non-government, with further distinctions in the latter group being “private”, “systemic Catholic”, “other denominational schools” and “community schools”. While the non-government schools are often referred to as independent schools, the vast majority receive some form of government funding and so there are very few establishments in Australia that could truly be regarded as independent of any government assistance. Even though most schools enjoy government assistance, there is little government intervention in the governance of schools outside the government education system, although increased levels of reporting are now required.

In this study all four types of non-government schools were represented among the participants.

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the four kinds of non-government schools.

Type of school	Characteristics
Private	Mainly autonomous in their governance but still receive government funding Mostly established by religious groups particularly Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Churches High fee paying Long history of high quality provision of education
Systemic Catholic	Low to medium fee paying Largest non-government group Coordinated by the Catholic Education Office
Denominational	Low to medium fee paying Fastest growing sector Established by non-Catholic religious groups
Community schools	Low to medium fee paying Smallest sector Includes Montessori type schools Established by non-religious groups

International perspective

Thirteen of the thirty-eight participants were born overseas and it became obvious during the collection of data that Australia offers a unique level of choice of schooling. Five of these families had moved to Western Australia specifically to give their children a guarantee of a “good education”.

.. the reason we come probably here is for the education of the children. So [my husband] didn't mind to put the money.... We were happy to do it. ..Of course the education is more advanced here than there. Secondly although from primary school to high school in [our country] they are free, that's OK with us, but once you finish your high school, um, ah, places in the universities are, they have a quota system, um, it's very difficult to compete with, in [our country]. For example you get A and the other fellow get C and you can't get into university. So that's why a lot of .. their parents they just sell the property just to send the children's so they know their children get an education, if they can't migrate to other places, so it's better they just send the child (Geraldine, p.15).

In their countries of origin, there was no possibility of their children having a freedom of schooling that would guarantee the best result governed by the desires of the parents for them to have a tertiary education. During the comparative analysis of the data it emerged that these families had a different understanding of educational choice as they were not usually well informed about the culture of non-government schooling in Western Australia and the level of choice that is present.

BASIC SOCIAL CONCERN: BEING CHALLENGED TO CHOOSE

The basic social concern is entitled *BEING CHALLENGED TO CHOOSE*. This major category emerged from the data as each participant showed that a serious challenge that they faced in rearing their children was to provide education within the limits of their resources and circumstances, yet taking into account the needs of their whole family. The causal conditions resulted in the families *being challenged to choose*.

The participants in the study were all involved in a common circumstance, that of choosing education for their children. Even though education is a focus for all parents in Australia because it is compulsory for children to attend school until 15 years of age, there are causal conditions that give rise to the phenomenon where parents are challenged to choose outside of the locally provided government education. The parents who participated in this study shared meanings and behaviours that constituted the substance of the theory, but, as assumed by grounded theorists, the shared specific social psychological problem was not necessarily articulated (Hutchinson 1986). As the participants spoke of what they were doing in the education of their children early in the data collection, a process of decision-making began to emerge. However, in order to reach a conceptual understanding of their basic social concern a much higher level of inference was required in the conceptualisation of the data. It resulted in an understanding of the shared concerns and meanings of the participant group.

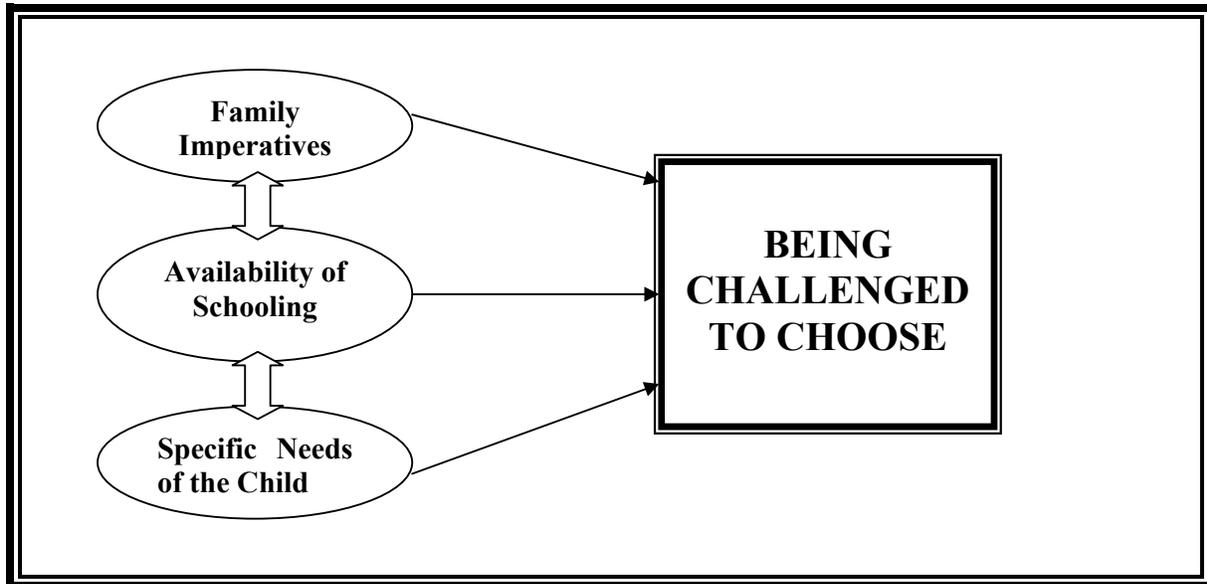
All participants were aware of the compulsory nature of education in Western Australia and, to a greater or lesser extent, of the variety of options that were available to them. The extent of the possible choices was considerably different according to their geographical location, educational awareness and socio-economic group. Substantial information was provided about the limits and needs of each family and the development of a list of imperatives that was then negotiated throughout the education of their children as the needs and limits changed. The families were propelled towards complex decision making procedures because the provided education at their local government school did not meet their needs. For isolated participants there was, of course, no local school available. The degree to which parents engaged in the challenge to choose was related to their goal orientation and the obstacles that they encountered, and ranged from a minimalist stance to one of extreme effort where the family emigrated in order to provide a satisfactory choice.

Causal Conditions of *being challenged to choose*

The exact meanings of the participants cannot be understood in a vacuum. While placed in the context as described above, there are conditions that caused the parents to be challenged and choose outside the local government schools. Strauss and Corbin (Strauss and Corbin 1990) define the causal conditions as being those “events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon” (1990, p.100). The causal conditions that are described in this paper directly lead the parents into *being challenged to choose*. Where these conditions do not occur, parents face no challenge to choose different schooling because the local government education that is provided satisfactorily fulfils their needs.

This research describes three major reasons why parents choose schools outside the government sector. In this study they have been named: *Family Imperatives*, *Availability of Schooling* and *Specific Needs of the Child*. Where these causal conditions are not present, the parents have enrolled their children in local government education and remain satisfied with maintaining this situation. Figure 1 shows the three major properties of the core concern.

Figure 1: Core Concern of *Being Challenged to Choose*



The three causal conditions that impact upon parents causing them to look outside the government education system, or beyond their local school, for educational options.

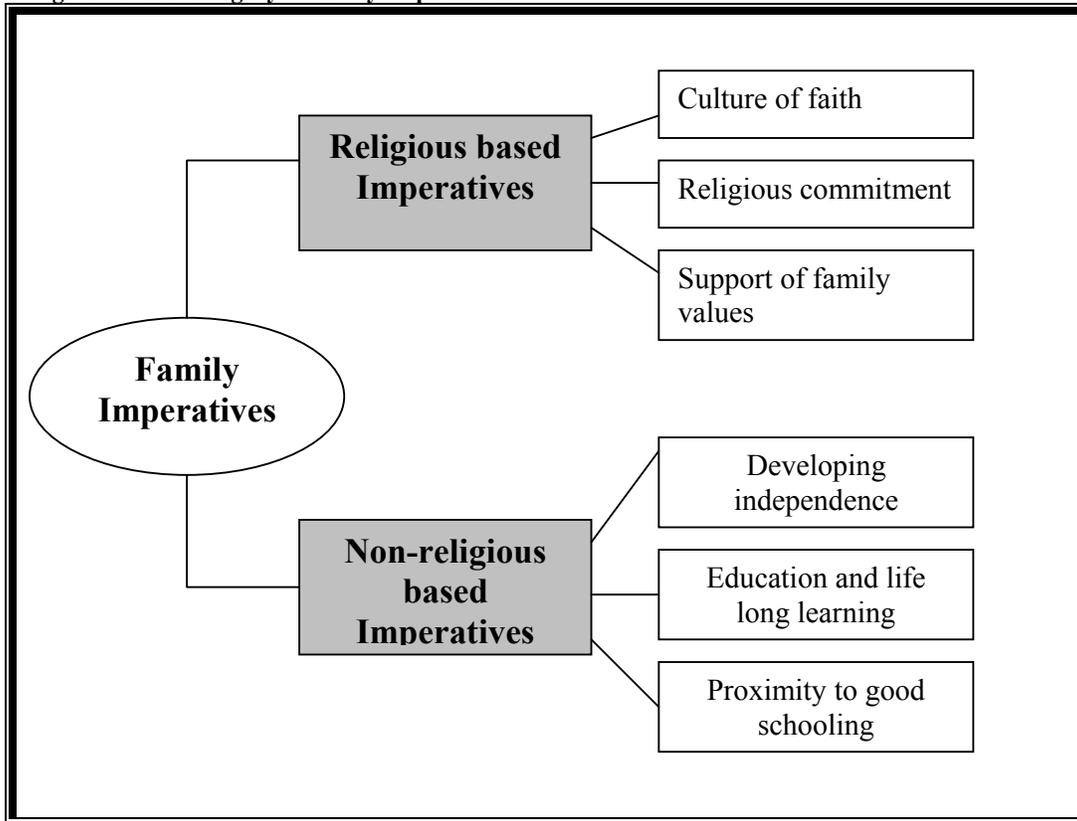
Family Imperatives

The term *imperative*, for the purpose of this study, means those things that are essential by nature to the identity of the family concerned. Each family has some aspects of their value system and life experience that define where they will centre their choices. For example, some families will not look outside the Catholic school system because their Catholicity and cultural immersion automatically excludes any other options unless a crisis occurs.

The range of imperatives that drive families into being challenged to choose and therefore engaged in a process that could lead to enrolment of their children in non-government education is dimensionalised by the level of engagement. Such engagement is indicated by the intensity of their imperative and of their active participation in the issues that are raised by the need for education of their children. Figure 2 shows the properties and sub-properties of this sub-category.

The dimensions of this sub category were substantially supported by the data but the brevity of this paper does not allow for further elucidation.

Figure 2: Sub category – Family Imperatives

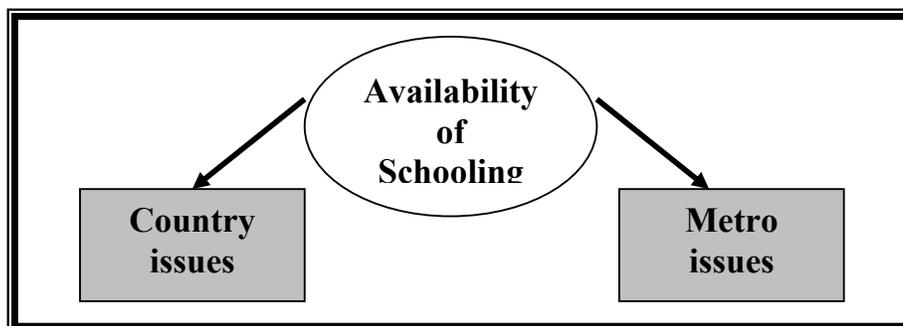


The sub category, *family imperatives*, reflects a number of factors.

Availability of Schooling

Figure 3 shows the properties of the sub-category of *Availability of Schooling*. While the country experience is different to that of metro dwellers, there is still an issue of availability in the city that is the initial imperative that can drive families to choose schooling other than that provided locally by the government education system.

Figure 3: Sub category - Availability of Schooling



The sub category, *Availability of Schooling*, has two dimensions.

Country issues

The country experience for families always provided some geographically imposed differences that would not affect metropolitan dwellers.

The participants indicated that they know that they are going to have to send their children away to school. The options for one family was to send them to government hostels in the nearest large country town or to send them to boarding school. The nearest Catholic school is 200km away and has no boarding facilities. Whichever choice is made, the parents are *being challenged to choose*.

..when you're in this isolated area they basically know from day one that that's what's going to happen; they're going to go away and there is absolutely no other choice. They could go to [two other country towns] but you want the best opportunities for your children (Tracey, p.14).

In this situation the sons and daughters have to leave home in year 8 to undertake their secondary education at boarding school. The sadness for the families is that they will never come back except for school holidays. There are few opportunities in the country for the sons and daughters who do not return to the land. When asked about the children returning to the country, Tracey's response was:

The girls will probably not – no. Or we certainly won't be encouraging them to come home (Tracey, p.13)

Metro issues

The closure of city high schools has given concern to some parents and caused them to be *challenged to choose*.

When our son was in year 5/6 one of the local government high schools had a major fire. The buildings were older and in need of attention so we thought our timing was right for a new school being rebuilt. However, discussion was underway for the closure of 3 local government high schools and the building of a new megaschool and as this process was being debated, no rebuilding occurred for 2 years. Instead the school became a "demountable city". Once decisions were finalised a[s] to the outcome of the local government school our son was ready to commence year 8. Re-building was just commencing and my partner was not happy to send our son to "a building site" for high school (Rosa, p.1).

Rosa explained that she and her partner had non-government options in the back of their minds but since they were immigrants they were not aware of what was available.

Being an immigrant meant that we were not familiar with the school system and options available to students in WA (government, Catholic and private). When our son was in primary school we put his name down for a local Catholic

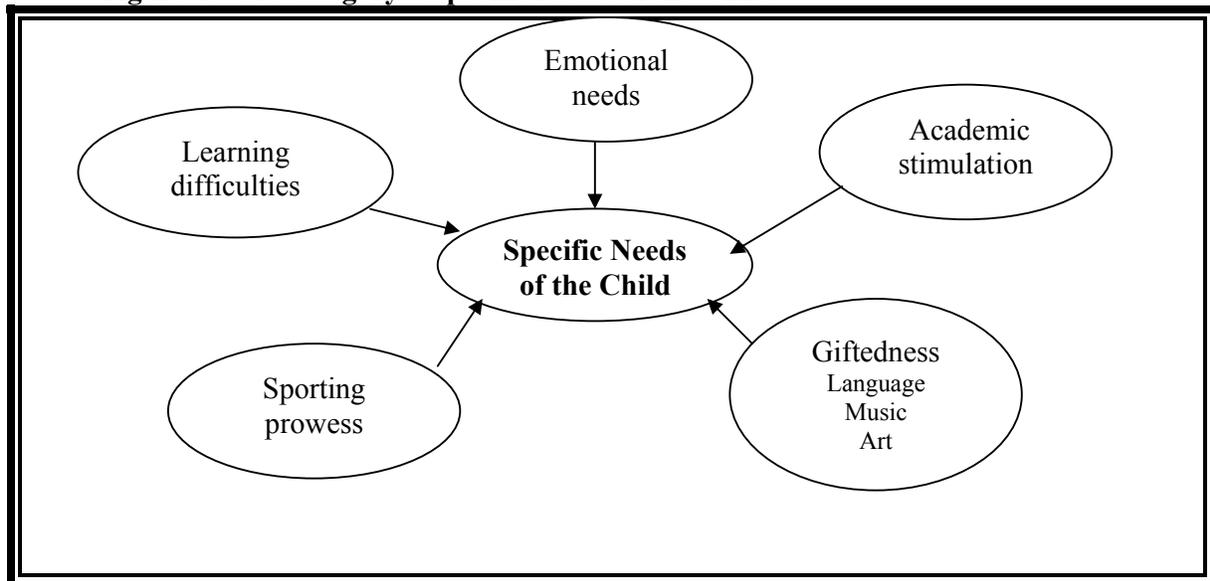
school although he had not been baptised. My partner and I had attended Catholic schools overseas and wanted to keep this option open for our son (Rosa, p.1).

Upon investigation they discovered that because of the closure of the local government high schools and the debate over the mega school, there were more than 200 families on the waiting list for the nearest Catholic systemic secondary school and since their son was not baptised he could only be included in a small number of possible places with similar applicants. While Rosa had other options in mind initially, the closure of three local government schools and the fire in another local secondary government school caused them into a situation of *being challenged to choose* as were a large number of other families as indicated by the waiting list of the nearest Catholic school.

Specific Needs of the Child

Children with specific needs presented as a major causal factor in parents being challenged to choose. Figure 4 shows the properties of the sub-category, Specific Needs of the Child. While this is not an exhaustive list of properties it still indicates the diversity of needs as indicated by the data.

Figure 4: Sub category – Specific Needs of the Child



The sub category, *Specific Needs of the Child*, is influenced in a number of ways.

For some families the concern revolved around their emotionally frail children who they felt would not be protected in the local government school. They required a high level of pastoral care that they perceived was not going to be available in the government system.

Academic stimulation was a requirement by families who knew the potential of their children and yet understood from sources around them that this would not be provided by their local government high school.

Where children showed exceptional giftedness families looked for a school that would particularly cater for those children's needs. For some families this was provided by scholarship in the government system to attend a school outside their area but these scholarships had limited access in the very popular schools. This caused the families to look outside the government system.

Exceptional sporting prowess prompted parents to seek a school that specifically catered for this particular talent. Where the goal orientation was sufficiently high the families would be looking towards a professional sporting career for their child and chose schools where talent scouts made appropriate connections.

Learning difficulties presented by children in primary school caused great concern for parents in their choice of secondary schooling. Such children often presented with multiple difficulties and so sufficiently supportive systems were sought and in this study were found outside of the government system.

From the analysis of the data in this study has emerged a grounding for the basic social concern entitled *BEING CHALLENGED TO CHOOSE*. Participants have been challenged to choose education outside of their local government schooling because of the presence of factors related to their own family imperatives, the availability of schooling, or their children's special needs. These causal conditions exist within the context for the concern in West Australian schooling. Some of the participants responded to only one of the causal conditions, while for others it was a combination of factors and their interrelatedness that moved them into the arena of choosing outside of the locally provided government education.

BASIC SOCIAL PROCESS: REALISING FAMILY POTENTIAL

Strauss and Corbin (1990) summarise process in grounded theory as "the linking of action/interactional sequences, as they evolve over time" (1990, p.157). They describe this action of bringing process into analysis as an "essential feature of a grounded theory analysis" (1990, p.157).

In this study, the process entitled *Realising family potential*, describes how the family makes a decision, and then maintains or changes that decision, in respect to secondary schooling. The process described in this theory has a forward movement towards an end result. Each family experiences it differently according to the factors that intervene to affect the process either by energising it to continue, to stop, or to change direction. When the causal conditions, as described earlier, are in place then the family must move into a double-phased, multi-staged process in order to solve their concern over being challenged to choose outside the education provided at the local level by the government. If the causal conditions are not present, then there will be no challenge and the local government schooling will satisfy them. While the process is similar to that of a passage, it is also flexible in that as some families will experience some phases and stages in great depth and almost bypass others, other families will experience it differently. The conceptualisation of this process has emerged from the data taken from families from both metropolitan and country locations who had engaged in making educational choices both within and outside the government

system. This study does not seek to discover a model that will predict the course of parents' choices, but rather, it seeks to interpret the data in such a way as to find meaning within their behaviour.

Realising family potential informs the conceptualisation of the core process of this theory. Family potential is being realised in the sense that the potential is being brought to fruition with the help of education (1999). Realising the family potential through education continues throughout the process and, where there are challenges, changes are made. It is the primary focus of the theory.

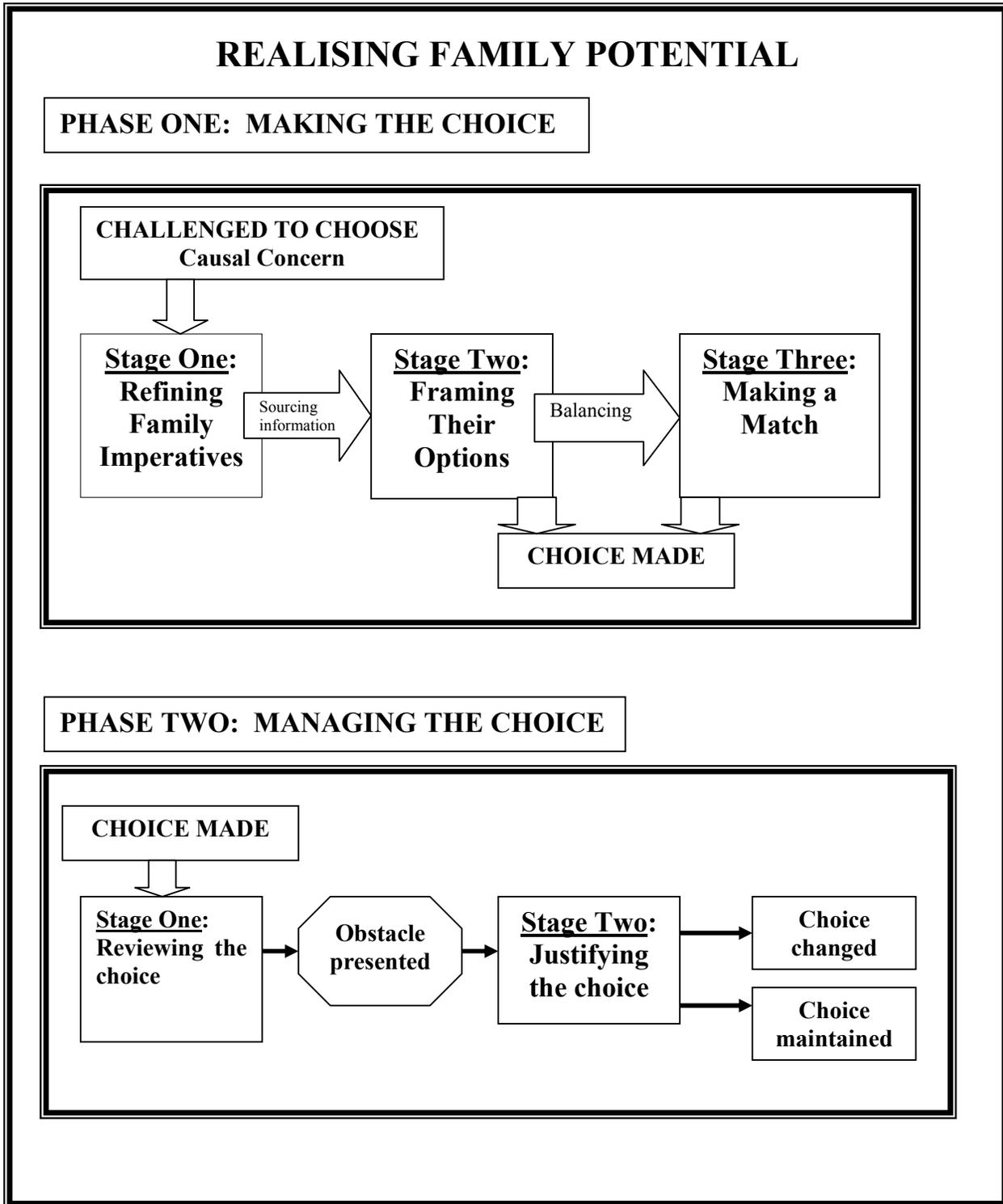
A dimension of the core process is the family's understanding of its own potential as it grows during this process, and the future possibilities that evolve. A further aspect of that dimension occurs when there is a growing understanding of a child's limited potential and its impact on the family's future educational choices, as well as other life choices. This aspect of the process reveals itself as a challenge and may cause the family to make changes that re-engage the process and refine their family's imperatives. A deeper explanation of this will unfold as the core process is presented.

In *realising their family potential*, each family participated in the different phases at different levels. The action within one of the phases or goals could be of minor importance to a particular family's context, the level of engagement in each phase or stage being dependent on the goal orientation and any obstacles that were impeding the attainment of that goal. Some families needed to engage in the process only to a minimal degree while other families had to engage at a very high level, bringing to bear all of their resources.

Figure 5 describes the process schematically. The goal of the process is to realise the family's potential. It does not refer only to their educational potential, as many family needs must be balanced in the process. In the first phase, once the family has refined its imperatives, the relevant options are framed and the balancing process reaches its initial conclusion when a match has been made taking account of all possibilities. In the second phase, management of the result will then involve either maintaining the choice or re-engaging the process when, and if, the choice must be changed.

Since the results of this research are complex and have produced an elaborate theoretical construct, it is not possible to present both phases in detail. This paper deals only with phase one as it presents the process through which families proceed in order to make a choice for the schooling of their children.

Figure 5: Core Process – Realising family potential

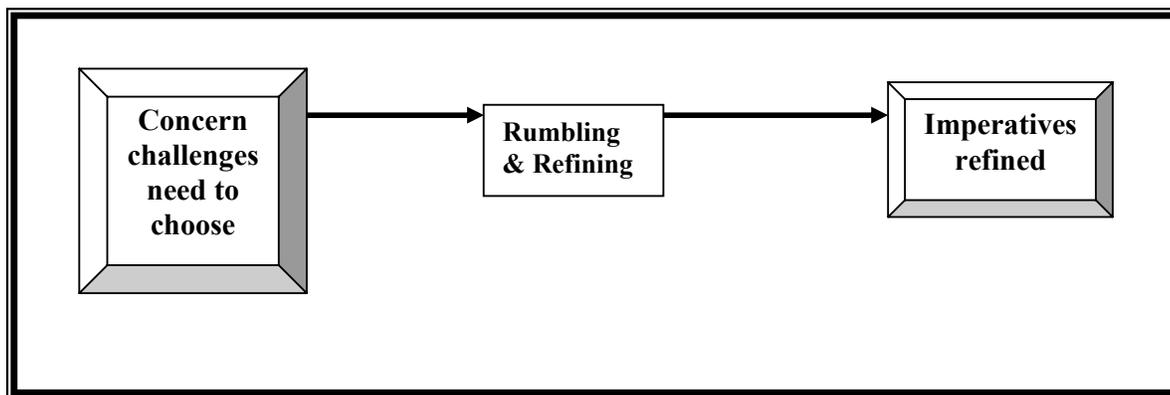


Realising family potential exhibits two main phases, each with internal stages

Stage One: Refining family imperatives

While *refining family imperatives* is the first stage of the process, it is also an aspect of the decision that the family returns to time and again when challenges arise. The more challenges that intervene in the decision-making, the more the imperatives are refined to the highest order. Family members' responses to their own personal history intervene as a condition in the refinement of individual imperatives, along with the attitudes of others around them, their growing understanding of their child's needs, and the needs and influence of the wider family. This stage begins with *rumbling*, then develops into *refining*, and operates as a continuum that concludes when the family's imperatives have been sufficiently refined to be able to frame the options that are open to them. If the options within the frame are changed by some other intervening condition, then the family must re-engage in the first stage of this phase of the process.

Figure 6: Stage One – Refining family imperatives



Refining Family Imperatives proceeds through a process of rumbling and refining.

Rumbling and Refining

Refining is the process that the family enters into in order to reach a stage where their imperatives are sufficiently clear so that they can select some options from which to choose a suitable school. Early in the analysis of the data, an *in vivo* code, named *rumbling*, emerged that described the beginning of the refining stage. It has an expressive nature that describes the action of the participants. Rumbling gives the sense that the action is still a long way off and that there is no immediacy, but at the same time, it is time to begin considering what to do. Parents are beginning the process of choosing a form of education for their children that will realise their potential. They are aware that the need for secondary schooling is approaching and a decision has to be made. For some families, the causal conditions have already established that there is a need, or desire, to move outside the schooling provided by the government at the local level. The participants then engage in what David described as rumbling.

I am pondering how other people, how parents choose. There's a kind of ruffling, a rumbling through the community about the kids in year six and seven. Where are we going to send them? What are we going to do? What are you doing?

What do you know? How do people choose? Where do they get their information? And their criteria? (David, p.17).

Intervening conditions

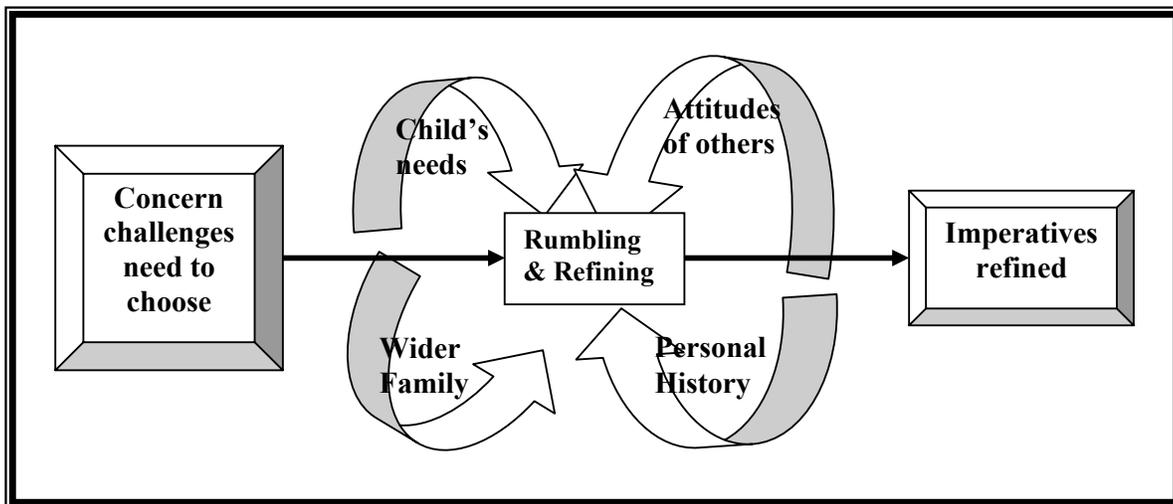
The conditions that intervene to either facilitate or constrain the movement (Strauss and Corbin 1990) towards the refinement of the family imperatives do not occur in a specific order and not all the conditions will be relevant to all participants. For those who were challenged to choose because of the high level of strength of their imperative, there was little room for further refinement of those imperatives and so they moved quickly into the phase of *Framing Their Options*. For example, Tracey’s family had two powerful imperatives: secondary schooling was not readily available because of the remoteness of their farm, and they were also determined to provide Catholic education. As Tracey declared,

You basically know from day one what’s going to happen; they’re going to go away and there is absolutely no other choice. ... you want the best opportunities for your children. Specifically, I really wanted my children to have a decent Catholic education that they just don’t get out here (Tracey, p.14).

The strength of these two imperatives moved the family through the phase of *Framing Their Options* more rapidly than other families.

While moving along the *refining* continuum from the concern that has *challenged them to choose* outside locally provided government schooling, to the *refinement of their imperatives*, the family is influenced by intervening conditions. These do not occur in any set order and not all are relevant to every family, but they do influence the pace with which the family moves to the next stage.

Figure 7: Stage One – Refining family imperatives with intervening conditions



Refining Family Imperatives as a continuum with intervening conditions shown.

As an indication of the richness of the data, an example from each intervening condition has been chosen and presented below.

Intervening conditions - Personal history

Personal history includes each parent's own educational experience as well as their experiences in making educational choices for their eldest children which then relates to choices made for their younger children. The condition influences how their imperatives are refined. Albert summed up this particular aspect of the decision making process in his response:

Well, you always tend to, well we do anyway, we sort of look at you know um what our parents did for us and sort of took the best out of it and you know, we said, well, you know the not so good things we won't bother about, the good things we will hold onto and cherish and make use of (Albert, p.7).

Intervening conditions - Child's needs

One participating family's imperative for private education was influenced by the intervening condition of their child's specific needs. They were challenged to choose outside the local government system because their imperatives required a private education and the specific needs of their two sons, for whom they had chosen secondary education, were dominant. He describes his own attitude that had to change according to the needs of his son.

[Catholic education] was not on our agenda since we're not Catholic. My childhood was programmed anti Catholic, beware of Catholics. If someone had said to me when I was 15 "Your son's going to a Catholic high school" I would have screamed "No way!" (David, p.4)

Michelle and David's second son had a rare disability that meant that he would require social and physical support but was intellectually very competent in some areas.

My thoughts were that our child would have particular needs which are definite and significant (David, p.2).

The result was that they turned to the Catholic system that had seemed so remote previously, but the needs of their son refined their imperatives so that a local Catholic College that had an excellent support system for students was approached. They found compassion and sensitivity.

Intervening conditions - Needs and influence of wider family

Mary and Gerard were *rumbling* about the possibilities for their last child, an only girl. They had limited availability of choice due to their country location and needed to *refine their imperatives* because the options are different for girls. Their daughter was experiencing difficulties at primary school. Home schooling had been considered as well as the option of working overseas, as they had done in their years as a young family. Their concern was exacerbated by the needs of Gerard's father, which intervened to refine their imperatives.

I guess the only thing that's holding us here is Grandpa, Gerard's dad is 92 and in the old folks home, there's nobody

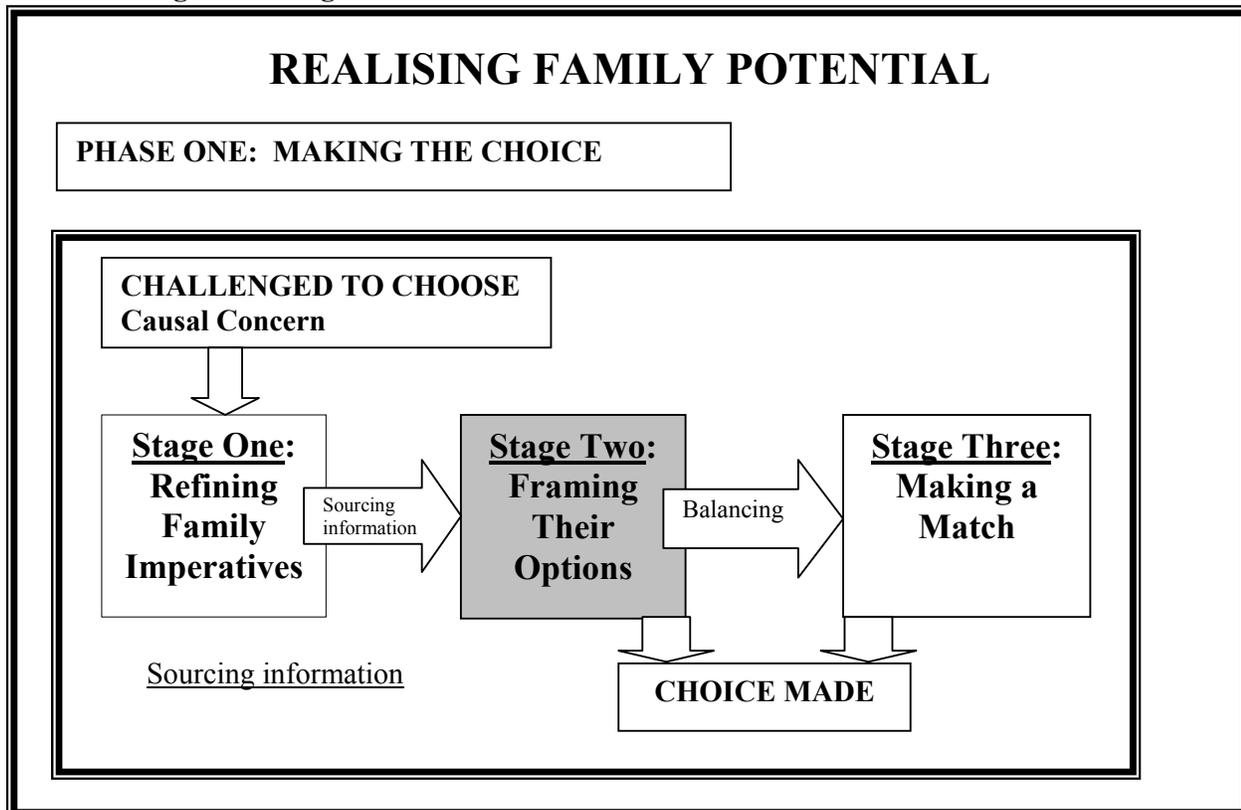
else so we can't go too far away, but otherwise we'd be well and truly looking for opportunities to work overseas again, ... anywhere you know, and she would be quite happy to come with us and to be home schooled and I would enjoy that, we'd both enjoy it, but while we're still here, I don't know (Mary, p.16).

Stage Two: Framing Their Options

In the second stage of the process of *Realising Family Potential*, the family uses their refined imperatives to identify possible choices and source information about the schools chosen. Intervening conditions that can affect the choices are the availability of resources, geographical location, external factors, accessibility of the chosen school, and critical family events. The refined imperatives of the family, combined with information about the possible choices, leads to the family into *Framing Their Options*. In many instances, only one possible *option was framed* and in these cases the family moved directly to enrolling their children and *managing the result* of that enrolment. If more than one option appeared within the frame, stage three was necessary so that a final choice of school could be made.

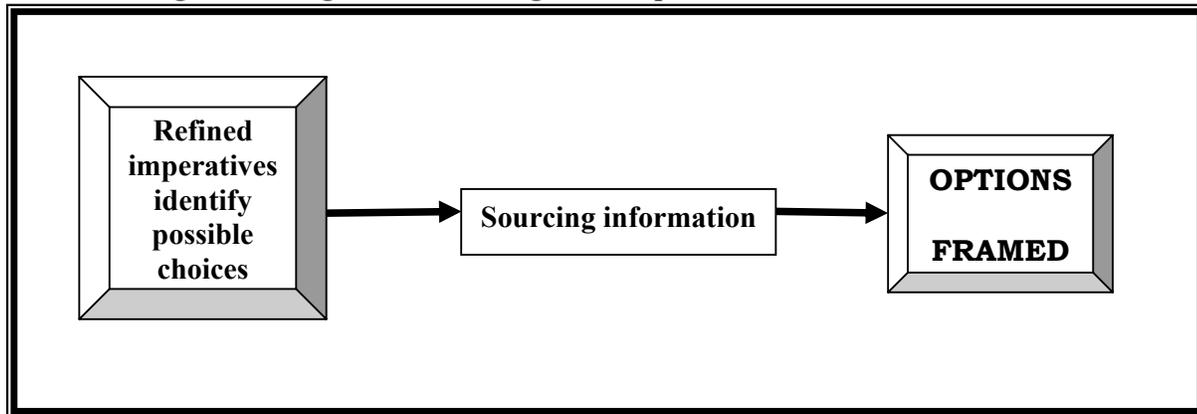
A facet of this particular stage is the degree to which the parents have engaged in deliberate sourcing of information to ensure that they have the greatest number of options available, and the degree to which they have confirmed that the opportunities are in fact available, for example, by securing enrolment at birth in special schools, or by moving into a particular neighbourhood in order to be near a desired school. This level of engagement is related, as before, to the goals set for achievement, or to the size of the obstacles encountered.

Figure 8: Stage Two within Phase one of the Core Process



Sourcing information is the procedural activity in which the family engages in this stage where the *options are framed*. There are many and varied ways in which to gain information and the range of family engagement in this activity is extensive, from relying on one simple source only (family or friends) to multiple ways of accessing information that requires a great deal of time and energy. Once again, the level of engagement was governed by the family's goal orientation and by the size of the obstacles encountered.

Figure 9: Stage two – Framing Their Options



Options are framed with the help of sourcing information.

One parent who presented a very high level of engagement in the process of sourcing information was Sally. Being a teacher herself, she had a strong interest in a holistic education.

I'm desperate to send them to a Catholic school but I won't do it unless I perceive that it is a good educational institution as well as ... I know that I'm going to get the spiritual side of it – that's a given. It's everything else as well (Sally, p.7).

In her search for information she used many forms of investigation.

I've made it my business to find out. I've been on school tours, I've spoken to parents and staff. I'm making sure I make the correct decision about where my child goes. I'm involved in the state system... so I know what goes on (Sally, p.2).

I've read all the information. From the standpoint of an ordinary person, I've been to the orientation day and I've read all the information. I don't really get a sense of what their package is. I have made my own inquiries. I pigeon-holed one of the heads of department at a conference and made him go through the mill. He gave very good answers – not a problem. I have a good friend who has just been employed there. If they've employed her, that's a very good indication (Sally, p3).

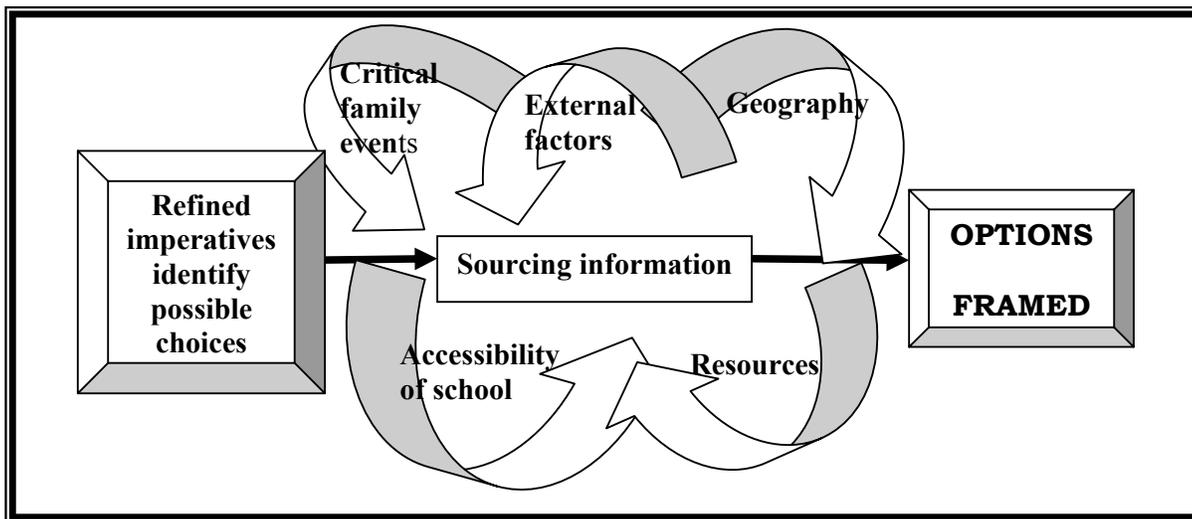
I had six months of long service leave last year. I went to nearly every school you can name and did the tour and interviewed them. I've got that many booklets and brochures. They were wonderful. I went on their little tour, I spoke to them (Sally, p.21).

The result of all her investigation was enrolment in a Catholic college that she considered to be the very best option.

Intervening conditions

Even though parents employed a range of strategies to source information to identify their options in choosing a school, each school was not automatically included in the frame of options. Various conditions intervened to increase the attractiveness of some options, while other conditions provoked a negative view of the school in question and it was not listed in the final frame of options.

Figure 10: Stage two – Framing Their Options with intervening conditions



Intervening conditions affect the options framed

Intervening conditions – Resources

A substantial intervening factor for families *Framing Their Options* was the availability of resources, both in regard to time and finances. Francesca and her husband went no further than to listen to the assessment of others.

When we came from [our home country], we arrived in March and they were halfway through the first term. We didn't have time to look for schools. We were told by friends and relatives that private school are expensive, so we were put off by that (Francesca, p.6).

Another family with four children had to carefully consider the financial burden.

...we came to question probably when he was in year 4, year 5 maybe, we won't be able to afford to send him to private school and that's why we looked at the different options, different schools, and I think in year 5 we had to sort of make a decision. At that stage we said "yes we can afford it" um, I mean the choice would have been if we can afford it, they'll go to Catholic schools, if we can't then it'll be a state school and then we would have to find you know a good state school (Albert, p.3).

Albert was also conscious that as a shift worker on a limited income, the financial decision would have wide ramifications for his family.

... we've been happy with it. Um the children are happy with it as well because you know sometimes they ask you questions like "why can't we go on holiday you know, so and so's been overseas last year and they're going next year again" but we say that's the choice they make, those children go to such and such a school you know. Both the mum and the dad work so it's quite different, they can afford it. With us it's different we can't. Our main priority is to put you through schooling make sure you have a good education, a good upbringing, and once that's been achieved then we can start going on holidays [laugh] (Albert, p.3).

His wife began to work when most of the children were in high school in order to assist with the financial burden.

Intervening conditions – external factors

External factors beyond the control of the family were also experienced as an intervening condition while the family *sourced information*. In the nineteenth century (1864), the bishops of Australia declared that Catholic parents who did not send their children to Catholic schools were in grave risk of serious guilt (Fogarty 1959). The bishops insisted that Catholic children should have a Catholic education where their faith was brought into every level of their activity and learning and that the children are not submitted to a secular education. Well into the twentieth century that insistence still bore fruit. While its interpretation and application varied from place to place, the decision of the bishops was still effective 100 years later. Hugh spoke of two incidences where parish priests excommunicated parents for not sending their children to the Catholic school.

This family friend of mine, this one guy, it'd be in the 1930s I suppose, where his parents get excommunicated, because they pull him out of the convent because he's being bullied by older boys and sent him to the state school and the parents get excommunicated by the parish priest.

... .. Nobody could challenge what they could do. This guy was parish priest in the one place for 49 years and 6 months. Imagine how much control... ..

... ..in 1960 in [a country town]. [My friend's] mother was excommunicated because she sent him to the high school and

not to the convent which had about 6 boys in it all doing the one stream of subjects.

The exertion of such power in the local parish system had an effect on what parents could view as their choices and while it is not enforceable today, it exists in the collective memory of the Catholic community.

Another external factor for one country family revolved around the provision of schooling in their country community. In order to have a religious order of teaching sisters come to their town to help with the Catholic education of their primary school aged children, the parents were required to sign a contract to say that they would send their daughters to that particular congregation's boarding school in the city at the appropriate time.

...we wanted to get the nuns here, one of our commitments through the parish council was to send our girls to [their boarding school]. We had to sign on the dotted line (Betty, p.11).

While Betty and her family had their imperative of Catholic schooling firmly in their minds, their final *frame of options* could only include the specified girls' boarding school run by the religious order who provided education for primary children in their town. Again, while this is not the case at present, the memory remains.

Intervening conditions – accessibility of school

A *causal condition* for the family to be *challenged to choose* outside the local government schooling was described previously in this paper under the sub-category of *availability of schooling*. A further dimension of this sub-category appears as an intervening condition during the phase of *framing their options*. While a lack of availability affected metro and country families, an ability to access the schools chosen also intervened as a condition affecting their *frame of options*.

The experience for a number of families in the metropolitan area was that the excessive demand for Catholic secondary schooling made accessibility a problem in *framing their options*. Since most Catholic schools provide non-government education at a low fee level, it is very attractive to both Catholic and non-Catholic families. If you do not have your child attending a feeder primary school, your chances are reduced unless you can prove that your children attend the Parish Religious Education Program (PREP) and that you are committed within your own Christian parish.

You had to be involved in the parish. I was a reader anyway, at the time, at the parish, and then I took on teaching as a catechist. I knew that would all help, and it did, because he got in (Belinda, p.3).

Intervening conditions – critical family events

A further condition that influenced the *framing of options* was the intervention of critical family events. A critical family event that caused a change to the *framing of options* for one family was related to the employment of the mother. Anne had worked part time shift work for many years as the family matured but finally reached a crisis point in the political upheavals in the work place.

What seemed like a great job that was just going along, all of a sudden became the ghastliest, political, yucky thing. I worked through that and decided I'd stay as long as I absolutely had to, and that I would ... sometimes you can't change things. It was either stay and be totally revolting or leave. I stayed as long as I could and we started a home-based business. That enabled me to leave. When I left work, I'd been doing it for 25 years in between having babies and going to school and all that. Then I stopped. It was an unbelievable change (Anne, p.3).

The change that Anne referred to then opened the possibilities for a new range of options.

Intervening conditions – geography

Availability of schooling was one of the three causal conditions described previously that challenged the family to choose outside of the government schooling offered locally. One dimension of that causal condition was the geographical location of the school in relation to the family home and it now reappears as an intervening condition when families source information so that they can frame their options of good available choices.

For country families, geography is a critical factor in their choice of secondary schooling. Mary described country life as being “in Siberia culturally”. There were limited possibilities for education in upper school particularly, and in cultural areas.

...we think about it and we think are we depriving our kids by being in the country and being not, you know, they really haven't got the opportunities for that extra development in music and drama and all sorts of areas that they might be able to do if they were in the city (Mary, p.18).

Mary and Gerard faced difficulties when they first began educating their sons in upper secondary education. Their country town provided good schooling up until year 10 at the local district high school but upper schooling became a problem. They could send them to other large country towns where there were boarding facilities but as they wanted Catholic education, it was sensible to go to the city so that they had maximum possibilities and since the city cultural life was a drawcard, family needs would be pointed in the same direction. When they educated their eldest boys, options were very limited.

... there were only two Catholic boys schools taking boarders at the time ... it was like 10, 15 years ago... but then the rural

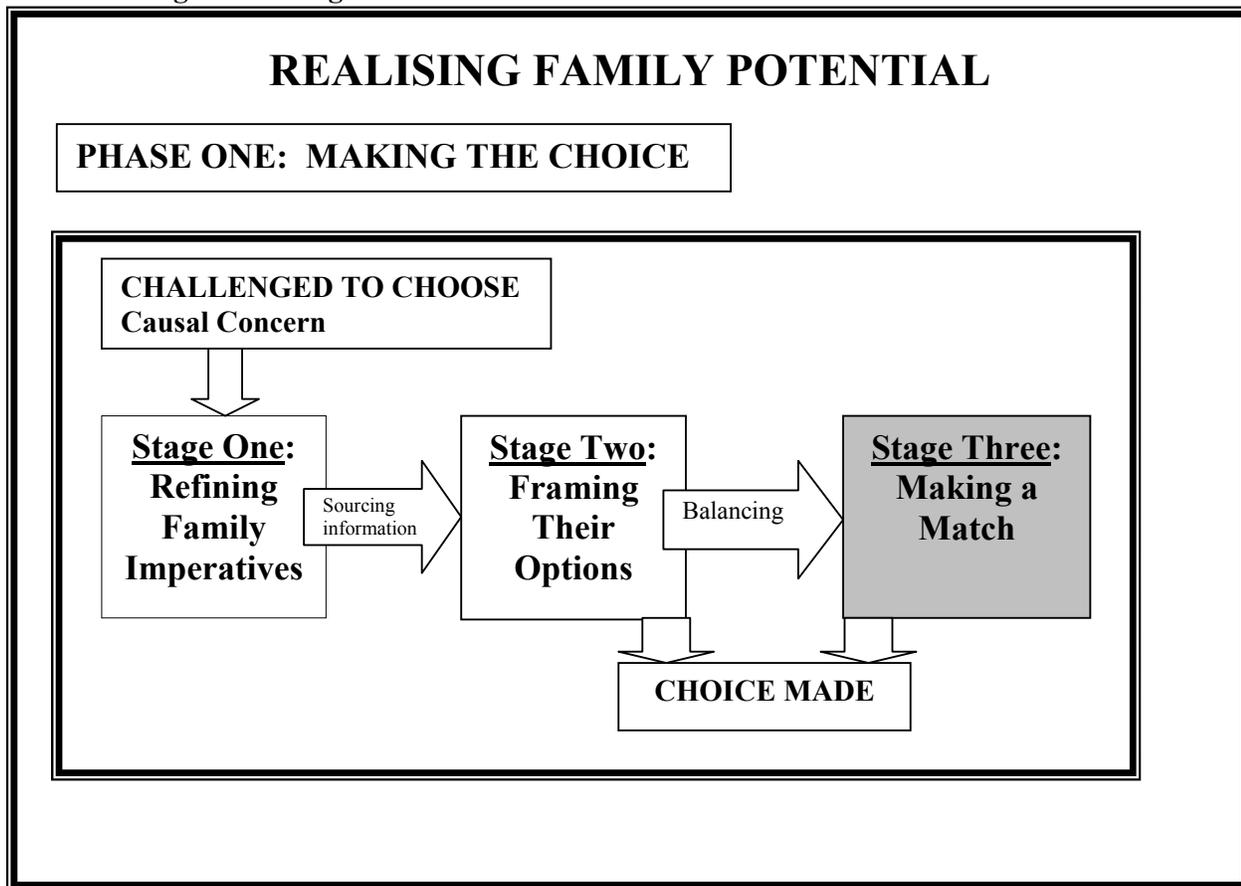
depression hit and people couldn't afford boarding school and also the population numbers dropped a bit I think (Mary, p.8).

For their third son, they decided that since he was very happy in the country school and had severe asthma and therefore carpeted boarding facilities would be a problem, travelling by bus to the nearest large town would be the best alternative. All decisions were complicated because of their geographical location.

Stage Three: Making a Match

Stage three of the process describes how the decision to confirm an enrolment in one particular school is made. Once the family have defined their imperatives, and formed a frame of options, they then need to *make a match* between their possible options while balancing all of the various intervening factors so that the best possible outcome for the realisation of the family's potential is realised. It is evident from the data described below that this phase for some families is encountered concurrently with the previous phase because the *framing of their options provides* only one choice. It is therefore only the family with more than one option in the frame that must complete the third stage separately.

Figure 11: Stage Three within the Core Process

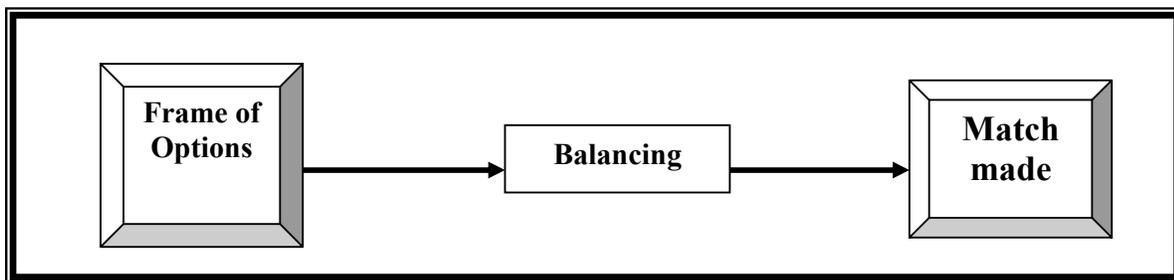


Realising family potential with the first phase only, Making the Choice

Balancing

The third stage involves the parents, and possibly the children, in balancing the options. At this stage the *family imperatives* can once again be re-engaged and refined. If the challenges are sufficient in magnitude, then the family will have to let go some of their previously important ideas and values and compromise to ensure that the options are maximised. The speed with which this decision is made is dependent on various factors. Should there be only two schools in the final *frame of options*, there will eventually be a factor that will lead to a confirmation of enrolment in one of the schools. Of course, if there was only one school in the final frame, enrolment could be immediately confirmed unless the family are subject to other critical events that could then return them to a previous phase.

Figure 12: Stage Three – Making a Match



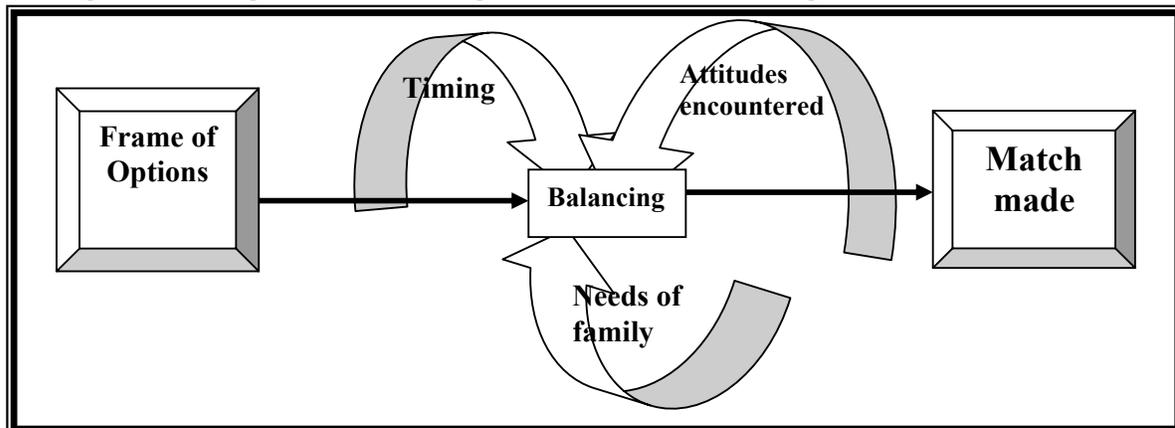
Making a Match is achieved by balancing various conditions.

Intervening Conditions

During the balancing process there are conditions that intervene to tip the balance in favour of a particular choice to ensure that the maximum value is gained from that choice. Time periods for enrolment and other issues, the attitudes of those involved in school communications, the individual child's needs in relationship to family needs, all combine to influence the final result. Initially it seemed evident that family resources also were an issue during the balancing phase but the data conclusively indicated that the issue of resources was decided as the family *framed their options*.

At the end of this phase the family *make a match* and conclude the enrolment of their child, or children, in the chosen school.

Figure 13: Stage Three – Making a Match with intervening conditions



Intervening conditions – Timing

An issue of timing arose for a family where a change of locality was needed.

We moved up; [he] was starting Year 1 as we moved. We moved in the December and [he] started in Year 1 in the January. There had been a lot of uncertainty as to whether we were actually going to move into this house or not. From here, the primary school is like 50 steps and you're there. It was within the community and that sort of thing. So I guess for convenience, I didn't look any further (Jane, p.3).

The timing constrictions placed upon the choice of schooling by their relocation meant that there were few schools in the frame. Later, Jane discovered that there was a Catholic school that could have been preferable, if she had been aware, but moving at the critical time of commencing school had an effect on their choice.

There is another Catholic primary school in [the next suburb] that, to be honest with you, I wasn't aware of when I first moved here....It's about the same distance, but I was working in [another suburb]. I just didn't look into it very well, I suppose. Had I realised, perhaps they could have gone there (Jane, p.3).

Intervening conditions – Attitudes encountered

In Stage One where the family were *refining their imperatives*, the *attitudes of others* was seen as an intervening condition in that it was able to affect how each family developed what they found was essential to their educational choice. In *making a match*, the *attitudes of others* once again becomes important as the decision to finalise an enrolment is brought to a conclusion.

During the *balancing* stage, Rosa's final encounter that helped confirm the family decision to send their son to a particular school was the attitude of the school principal. His direct and personal efforts to make connections with their son at an information evening impressed Rosa and Greg sufficiently to confirm their enrolment.

Rachel and her family migrated to Australia from a country where Catholic education was not easily available or affordable. She would have preferred to send her sons to Catholic schools as she saw it as a good option since they are a very committed Catholic family, but she was deterred by the attitudes of others.

I don't know if it's particular to WA but people seem to think the government schools are bad and the only way you get a good education in Australia is to buy it by giving your child a Catholic education, even though you might not necessarily be Catholic... It comes from a number of people we know through work and through socialising - that have sent their children to Catholic schools and they're not remotely interested in Catholicism at all. In fact, some of the mothers that I have met have actually happily sent their children to Catholic schools

but actively discouraged any -- even when their kids say, "I might be interested in going to church", they actively discourage their children. "I don't really believe, you know. I don't really believe in Catholicism". I've heard them say this, and it's not just one person either - several people. So whilst on one hand I initially thought it was a good option, I began to think, "Why are people in Western Australia sending their kids to Catholic schools?" I changed my thinking about it a bit in the sense that I'm seeing a lot of people sending their kids there because they think that's the best thing to do. "It's the best thing to do." Well, yes, it may be, but you're not a very devout Catholic, and if the idea of me sending my child to a Catholic school is to get a Catholic education, then I don't know if I necessarily want my child rubbing elbows with your child, because your child is coming to school here, but he's hearing from you that Catholicism is not something that you endeavour to practice, it's something that you're just buying, like you buy an education off the shelf. So it's really discrediting it (P14, p.5).

Such an attitude moved Rachel to enrol her eldest son in the local government secondary.

Intervening conditions – Needs of family

The *needs of the family* are considered at many different levels of the process towards *Realising Family Potential* through education. In stage one of the process both the child's needs and those of the wider family were considered in the refining of the family's imperatives. In stage two where the family was *Framing Their Options, critical family events* and the maximal use of the family's *resources* were important while information was *sourced* so that specific options could be placed within a frame of choice. In this third stage, the family's needs are considered yet again while they *balance their options* and finally *make a match*. The individual needs of the child are placed in relationship to the family's needs.

Mary and Gerard had given considerable time and effort to finding a school for each of their children that would suit the child's specific needs. Their imperatives were strong and their goals for their children high and as their financial resources strengthened over time, their sources of information provided one school only in the frame of options and so *making a match* was achieved easily. Their fourth son easily outpaced his peers at the local District High School in their country town, but since he had made up his mind to be a high level athlete when he was only four years old, he chose a large metropolitan boarding school for the remainder of his schooling.

...he really made the choice. I suppose we wanted him to have the best possible opportunity to express all the potential that we knew he had and so it had to be a big school, it had to be a fairly high profile place where he would be able to excel. ... He went in year 10, he had 3 years there. He only boarded in year 10, he hated the boarding because it was so restrictive

and his brothers were living across the river you know, a trivial bike ride away... so we let him go and live with them in year 11 and 12 (Mary, p.12f).

The family's needs were satisfied and driven by their fourth son's natural drive, ambition and his proximity to his older brothers.

Conclusion

This paper has presented research findings of a qualitative nature about the causes and processes involved when families make choices about schooling. The complex grounded theory that has resulted from the research is only presented here in part. The second phase of the process about maintaining the choice and then the overarching process could not be included due to the size of the document. However, from the data has emerged a sound theory that adds considerable meaning to the understanding of choice of schooling. Such qualitative research is aimed at understanding the interpretations that people attach to their situations (Minichiello, Aroni et al. 1995).

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