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EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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Abstract

This ongoing grounded theory study is about making choices in education. It seeks to understand the basic social process in which people engage when they make decisions about significant life choices and it holds some surprises! Choices in the area of education are of increasing importance to families, those involved in the field of education, industry leaders and governments. This study focuses on those who have chosen non-government education. The deliberate nature of their choice, and the various costs involved have clearly framed the domain of inquiry. In-depth interviews with parents from country and city locations, and from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and schools, have begun to reveal a process in which parents engage in order to reach their decision. From the data a model of decision making is emerging that may well relate to other significant life choices. This paper will describe the basic social process upon which the grounded theory is being constructed and will be enlivened by revealing glimpses from the transcripts.

Background to the study

Since 1989 there has been a steady decline in enrolments in government schools (NCEC 2000). Less than 70% of students are enrolled in government schools, around 20% in Catholic schools, and a little more than 10% in other independent schools. Independent schools other than Catholic schools have the highest rate of growth. Their growth has been encouraged by the change in federal policy and funding but also has been stimulated by a high level of demand. This has been a cause for speculation in the press and amongst those who are educational providers and policy makers. The funding from state and territory governments towards education primarily goes to the government schools but the federal government funding is now weighted in favour of the independent sector (Buckingham, 2000).

From 1990 to 1996, an average of seven new non-government schools were registered each year. The Federal Coalition government abolished the New Schools Policy in 1997 and new non-government school registrations and enrolments subsequently increased to an average of 24 new schools each year from 1997 to 1999. Catholic schools have maintained their majority share of non-government school enrolments, but the fastest growing category of non-government schools is low-fee, independent (non Catholic) schools. (Buckingham 2000)

It begs the question: why? Why is there a swing to the independent sector, with or without federal government encouragement? What is it that parents want for their children that motivates them to choose schooling for which they have to pay and which requires other forms of family investment?

There have been a number of studies in this area in Australia since 1974 but all of them quantitative (Table 1). There are other studies under way at present as well but they are not yet completed. This is an active area of interest which was reflected in the choice of methodology.

Table 1

Name	Date	Title	Method
Joseph H. Fichter	1958	Parochial School: A Sociological study (USA)	Quantitative study
Helen Praetz	1974	Where shall we send them?	Quantitative
Andrew M. Greeley et al	1976	Catholic Schools in a Declining Church (USA)	Quantitative
Helen Praetz	1982	Public Policy and Catholic Schools	Historical analysis
Geoffery Partington	1988	Why parents are choosing independent schools	Quantitative
Peter Carpenter and John Western	1992	Choosing non-government secondary schooling	Quantitative
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Kelvin Canavan	1999	What parents expect of Catholic Schools	Quantitative
Assoc. of Independent Schools Vic.	2000	What Parents Want From Their Children's Education in Independent Schools	Quantitative
Assoc. of Independent Schools of Qld	2000	1999 Parent Survey: Why Parents Choose Independent Schools	Quantitative

Chosen methodology

The listed pieces of research have all given directions and formed conclusions but they still seem to leave something unsatisfied. This piece of research tries to look at the inside story. Analysis of quantitative data cannot build a theory that interprets reality, but grounded theory is able to make a theoretical formulation that can interpret the lived experience of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.22).

The theoretical formulation that results not only can be used to explain that reality but provides a framework for action. Researchers concerned with building theory also believe that theories represent the most systematic way of building, synthesising, and integrating scientific knowledge (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.22).

Since grounded theory requires the building of a theory from the data from the ground up, analyses of the large amount of literature already available is not possible until the theory is well formed so that the risk of contamination of ideas will be avoided. This stage has yet to be reached in this study.

So far, 32 participants have been interviewed in depth. Initially they were drawn from a Catholic secondary co-ed college but then expanded, through theoretical sampling, to include rural participants, different socio-economic groups, parents of non-Catholics attending Catholic schools, and parents of Catholics attending government and other independent schools. Each interview was coded and then processed by comparative analysis where each incident is compared to incidents of a similar nature and then the

resulting similarities are placed in categories and abstracted to higher levels of conceptualisation. As the intensity of the analysis gradually brings all ramifications into order, it becomes possible to construct a theory that will meet "four central criteria for judging the applicability of theory to a phenomenon: fit, understanding, generality and control (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.23).

Emerging ideas

What initially emerged from the data was a possible understanding of the process through which parents move, and at times oscillate, in order to make their choice. This process however, does not shed any light on the problem which parents are trying to solve or show the basis for their concerns. The theory therefore cannot progress until the problem is fully exposed. The beauty of the rigour of grounded theory is that it makes it impossible to go further without defining the problem. Parents are not faced with a "problem" which infers that something is wrong and has to be put right. They are faced with a serious concern about the educational potential of their whole family. Each family has finite resources and yet an understanding of the need to educate according to a personal set of principles. In the following section the emerging categories will be described.

One of the categories has been named 'responding to personal history'. (Table 2)

Table 2: Category: Responding to personal history

<i>Property</i>	<i>Dimensions of the property</i>
Extent	Dominant « Unobtrusive
Attitudinal result	Mutable « Immutable Positive « Negative
Definition	Memory « Experiential

It shows a range of faces – it can be dominant or unobtrusive, it can result in mutable or immutable attitudes. Which particular concern are parents trying to ease when they engage their own history? Are they trying to transfer their faith to their children, are they trying to negate their own history by making opposite choices? The mother of one of the participants felt completely assured that her daughter was to attend the same single sex Catholic school that she had attended and considered no variation until she sat in the corridor waiting:

Then I was enrolled at (a Catholic girls' school). On day one, I'd been enrolled so off she goes to do the rest of the hoo ha with the paper work, I suppose. Apparently the principal just took too long and she had to sit and wait for a while. She said this smell came back to her. She waited a bit longer and she got up and she came home and said, "I can't do it to you." So I went to (the local high school).

Her own personal memories, aroused by the smell, made her reform her opinions of the school and change the enrolment. Both the rational and the non-rational are affecting the resultant choice but what is it that she is trying to do?

For some parents the expression of their own personal values is very strong (Table 3).

Table 3: Category - Expressing personal values

<i>Property</i>	<i>Dimensions of the property</i>
Articulation	High « Negligible
Intensity	Invasive « Non-invasive

There was a range of articulation from very high analytical viewpoints to a negligible capacity. The intensity of the values could be totally invasive or minimalist in their impact. Some of the parents interviewed were so completely imbued with their Catholicism that they could not counter any choice outside the Catholic system except if there was a major crisis.

(My husband) and I both went to Catholic schools and to Catholic high schools, and that's what you know and you're comfortable with. There is that element of fear about the unknown and um, and sending them to high schools. We did at one stage consider it, not because we weren't happy with Catholic schools, but there was a time when we were really

struggling and were getting into a lot of debt and we had to kind of think about well, you know, a lot of this was happening because we were sending them to Catholic schools. Um, but we decided we weren't

prepared to take the risk and send them to government schools.

This family could only counter the choice for the Catholic system if the financial or social justice crisis became irreconcilable with what they were trying to do, but what is it that they are trying to do that is affected so strongly by their own history?

Some had never had any previous contact with Catholicism like the participant who was a teacher in the country and father of two girls. His personal history was much more removed from his choice for his daughters. The local high school catered well for students to year 10 but beyond that the choices ranged from a variety of boarding situations in various larger country towns or boarding schools in the city. The two daughters had been to the same school where their father taught all their school lives and he wanted them to learn to be independent, and at the same time be safe and develop some kind of life in the metro area where they were to continue with some tertiary kind of education. Two independent schools were beyond their reach financially so the closing options became two Catholic boarding schools.

Yeah, I think it was the atmosphere and theyeah yeah. They just, it just seemed to sort of blend I guess with what um, our moral levels and

expectations and things were, values were.

He wanted what Catholic education could offer his girls as they learned to be independent in the city in a transitional phase before tertiary education, and yet in a protected and supportive environment. How can this be conceptualised so that it clearly represents what was he looking for when he and his family decided to take this option in education?

For some the assessment of their children's needs became paramount (Table 4).

Table 4: Category - Assessing needs

<i>Property</i>	<i>Dimensions of the property</i>
Extent	Not considered « Fully considered
Duration	Since birth « recent
Articulation	Negligible « Highly developed

One family had no financial difficulty and could choose totally according to other factors. Their son has a rare disorder and he needed special care so they sought help from the independent sector. Their eldest son who is bright had been through the government and had done well at a respected high school and is now studying law. His comment, however, about a choice of state school for his young brother was that he would be "eaten alive". Both parents had been educated in the government sector and were both doctors. The father had a long term bias against "private" education and clearly stated his prejudice against the cost of such education:

It was years ago as a young adult I thought "Private schools! What a waste of money" The whole thought of spending twenty thousand dollars on one kid, this is dreadful when the government provides it free. And I guess we're reasonable well off and I guess this is a tiny price you have to pay for good care. A crucial time in a teenager's life. In a sense with (his older brother) we didn't have to pay fees.

...If I could know in advance that (he) was going to be a drug addict and suicide when he was twenty and I could look back and say "what could I have done, would I have spent fifty thousand dollar. ... I have a sense that we are doing our best for (him).

This particular statement "doing our best" has come through in a number of the interviews. If parents are doing their best, what is it that they are doing?

Another family of six boys and one girl engaged to a very high level in the assessment of each child's needs. The participant had a high level of articulation and had spent a great deal of time analysing each situation. They therefore chose a variety of secondary schooling situations for their children ranging from expensive metro private boarding schools to country government hostels and now to moving to the city for the last child to be educated at a private independent college which is connected to a university and has no religious affiliation at all. They are Catholic people of great faith and feel that the faith of this last child is not in any way dependent on Catholic education. What then have they invested the past thirty years of their lives, and a huge proportion of their finances, doing?

Wombing Hope

Most recently in this study, an understanding of the parents' concern has begun to emerge as an image of "Wombing Hope". Each family has a different set of descriptors and yet all carry a common concern: how to nurture the educational potential of the family members. The last participant said that what she wished to bring to her family was hope.

"as you say 'what do you want?' I'd have to say we probably would like to hope that the experiences we give the children through family life and interaction with Church, and as a corollary of that their education, that they will eventually come to that same sense of belonging within a community of people who have a particular value, value system in life.

When I talk about the kids and their future, what they're, where they're, the stages they're at now, and where you think they might get to , it's hope."

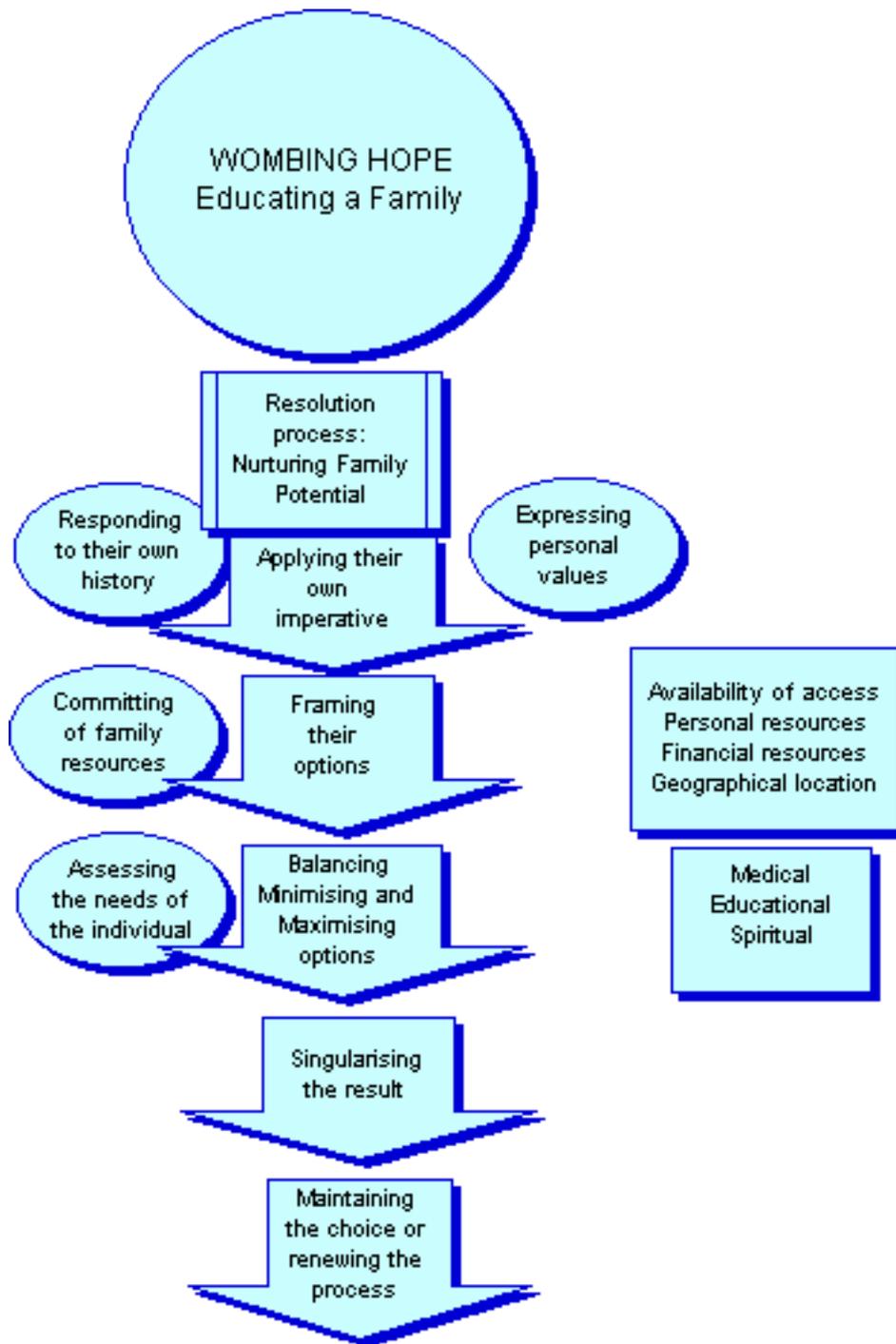
Wombing Hope can image a family moving towards producing independent, educated people who can then move on and in time develop their own capacity for Wombing Hope. The internal conditions of the womb are dependent on the health history, how it has been nurtured itself in terms of nourishment, genetic disposition and protection from damage. These conditions of its own personal history will be major contributors to the development of the womb and its independent products. Some of course, will never be independent and so will eventually rely on other social groups to nurture them.

The nature of each Womb of Hope will be unique and result in unique products. In order to retain their uniqueness they will sustain themselves alongside those who are similar and wish for similar outcomes. So it is with the emerging picture of families whose desire it is to provide a particular education for their children so that the end result will provide the best possible degree of hope. The criteria upon which the hope is based is not solely academic with economic advantage in mind but refers to a large range of influences on the child that are a concern to the parents. As with the products of the biological womb, the time of birth is determined by a range of influences. Sometimes the baby will trigger the event, sometimes damage from external forces, sometimes a genetic irregularity, sometimes a chemical abnormality. It is the same in a womb of hope. The time of separation can be triggered by the individual child or by a whole range of other events and circumstances. The image describes a situation where the wombing of hope is not just about schooling from Preprimary until year 12, but from birth to independence. One participating family guaranteed their children two years of full support for further education after year 12 and then after that they would have a roof over their heads but would have to be self sufficient financially in all other matters. They had counted therefore that they had eight years left until child number seven would be independent!

The full development of this image is not yet complete but it is certainly a useful framework into which the details from the participants can be managed.

Processual theory

How families actually reach their decision is described in the following diagram.



The first category in the process has been named "applying their imperative". Each family has some aspect of their value system and life experience that defines 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. Other families will have their imperative named by their geographical location. Country families interviewed found that their location and lack of access to upper schooling in particular forced them to engage in residential schooling either

in the metro area or in another country town. Sometimes these imperatives were recognisable well and truly prior to the enrolment process and then for others they only became imperatives at the critical time of the decision. Table 5 shows some of the properties and their dimensions.

Table 5. Category: Applying their imperative

Property	<i>Dimensions of the property</i>
Intensity of application	Mutable « Immutable
Timing	Pre-birth « Recent
Articulation	Minimal « Highly developed

Several families interviewed belonged to the "immutable" end of the spectrum when it came to applying their imperative. There was no choice other than Catholic. This had been decided before the children were born and no other alternative was considered up to the time of the interview.

The country experience for families always provided some geographically imposed differences that would not affect metropolitan dwellers. If their imperative was that it "had to be Catholic" then the lack of easy access to such educational possibilities would be tempered and constrained by this fact. Some country families who had not had any previous experience with Catholic education chose a city Catholic boarding school because the most important thing for them, their imperative, was to have a "good education" for their children that also had a caring and supportive environment. That ruled out what they knew of government hostels connected to senior high schools as well as metropolitan possibilities. One parent interviewed had a highly articulated view of education and had sought firstly to provide the best fit for each child and so a wide range of possibilities were considered. Their family imperative was more about being committed to a world view of life long learning to the extent where their older children's education had begun in a third world country. Home schooling while overseas had been a good experience but as they returned to Australia the number of children demanded the introduction of schooling outside the home and Catholic education was chosen as the best alternative. The participant still viewed this as being a second alternative because a classroom of children would all be tinged with a greyness when all treated the same.

Once the imperative is in place the next part of the process requires the options now available to be framed. For example, a country family might find that once the imperative is in place, higher education cannot take place in the home town, then the particular options that are left then need to be examined through that particular lens. Table 6 shows some of the properties and their dimensions.

Table 6. Category: Framing their options

Property	<i>Dimensions of the property</i>
Immediacy	Instant « Continual variation
Result	Mutable « Immutable
Rationale	Wide input « No input allowed

For some participants, the frame of options was instant and they did not vary. They lived in neighbourhoods serviced by "good Catholic schools" and attended the feeder primary schools. There were no other options considered and their plan seemed immutable. Their rationale was based entirely on their Catholic imperative. For others the frame provided a continually varying list of possible schools and even the result was mutable within a short time of enrolment. For these people there was often a wide input of information about the available possibilities from a range of sources so their rationale for placing a particular school in the frame had varying justifications.

Once the options are in focus the process now becomes one of balancing each of them by minimising the negatives and maximising the positive aspects of each possible solution. This aspect has not yet been analysed in any depth.

Table 7. Category: Balancing options

Property	<i>Dimensions of the property</i>
Flexibility	Totally flexible « Totally rigid
Investigation of options	Choices analysed « No analysis undertaken

As the balancing act of refining and redefining the options continues, eventually there is a need to singularise and name a result. The final decision can be based on something as simple as what the principal wore when doing the enrolment interview, or how welcoming the boarding facilities seemed to be. Alternatively, the result might be singularised by a further imperative that relates to very powerful philosophical convictions. The singularising may take many years as the parents prepare for this passage of life, or it may simply be made at the last possible moment before enrolments close.

Table 8. Singularising the result

Property	<i>Dimensions of the property</i>
Immediacy of decision	Instant « long procrastination
Portent of final criterion	Life imperative « insignificant detail

The decision may have been made, the framed options singularised by the simple fact that the father of the child had been to this school. The imperative of family history is in action. Alternatively, there may be a long procrastination that is only singularised at the deadline of enrolment, and then may have to be changed if acceptance is not forthcoming. The demand for some metropolitan Catholic secondary schools in Perth is so high that there is no access by country families who wish to move to the city or board their children with family, or by families who have had to move from another state.

The final aspect of this processual part of the developing theory is the maintenance of the enrolment. For some parents on one end of the spectrum, there is no need to ever reconsider the enrolment status at any time during the schooling of their children. For others, it is a continual process of evaluating and deciding whether or not to maintain the enrolment. This aspect is yet to be fully explored in the data.

Conclusion

The research shows thus far that there is a very rich body of data to be interpreted so that the resulting theory can be formulated. Grounded theory provides a rigorous method that can only result in such a theory if the data is analysed and conceptualised in a systematic way that involves both inductive and deductive means.

Wombing Hope has emerged as a central idea but is not yet complete. It is expected that it will be completed within another twelve months.

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