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MANAGING SCHOOL CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

Issues of school choice have become prominent in public discussion, particularly in the last decade since limits on the establishment of new schools were reduced by the Federal Government with a resultant increase in possible choices for families. Alongside issues of choice are the issues that arise when a change of school choice is necessary. This paper describes the political context of school choice and the results of research into school choice that produced a theoretical model through the use of grounded theory method, a qualitative methodology.

Through the grounded theory method a substantive theory was developed that explained the process through which a family makes choices about schooling for their children. The theoretical model is comprised of two phases: phase one models the process that parents engage in to determine their choice of school for a child, and phase two models the management of that choice and the process that they engage in where there are challenges to the original choice. This paper presents the second phase of the grounded theory model, *Managing School Choice.*

Purposive and theoretical sampling were used to engage the parental informant group that included parents of children in the government sector as well as in non-government schools of varying kinds. The data were primarily obtained through formal interviews. The second phase described in this paper shows how families managed the choices that they made and this management involved two stages. The result of their management determined whether they would change their choice of school or engage what was necessary to maintain their original choice. If the choice was to change they returned to the first phase to make a further choice.

Introduction

In recent discussions about research into choice of schooling, a young woman commented that school choice is the way you softly wrap your children in dreams for their future and that everyone needs to work together to provide good opportunities for them. This succinctly describes the attitude of many parents who participated in this study of school choice over the past 8 years. The intention of this paper is to present an insight into the rich data that allowed a theory to be developed into how families manage the choices that they have made for their children's schooling.

The issue of school choice has been the focus of much recent discussion in political and educational arenas, as well as in the news media. Although substantial quantitative research has been completed, little has been done in Western Australia using a qualitative research paradigm that tries to uncover the meanings present behind the choices that a family makes in regard to education, whether these are choices about particular schools or choices between the available schooling systems.

The renewal of debate, and increase in financial support for education in non-government schools, has accelerated questioning as to how and why families choose a particular form of schooling for their children. While substantial research (listed in Appendix 1) has been able to ascertain the reasons underlying parents' choices, there is little Australian research that describes the actual process of their decision-making or reveals the understandings behind the meanings expressed in their choices. In this sense, the present study is hermeneutical in nature (Kerdeman, 1998, p. 284) in that it attempts to understand the interpretation and meaning behind the choices that are made by the family.

Schooling in Western Australia can be categorised as either government or non-government, with further distinctions in the latter group identifying private, systemic Catholic, other denominational schools and community schools. In the study described in this paper all four types of non-government schools were represented among the participants as well as participants engaged in government schooling and these are described in Figure 1.

Figure 1 **Non-Government Schools**

Type of school	Characteristics
Private	Largely 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 and some indigenous schools Established by non-religious groups

Political Context

The issue of school choice does not exist in isolation. It has political, sociological and historical contexts that enable it to be seen as part of a broader canvas of ideas and influences that are both national and international in their impact. In order to be consistent with recommended grounded theory practice (Glaser, 1998), this context was examined only after the development and validation of the grounded theory. As Glaser maintains (Glaser, p. 67), to present a full and unbiased theory it is important not to complete at the outset a thorough literature search, as it is essential that the researcher can be "as free and as open as possible to discovery and to emergence of concepts, problems and interpretations from the data". The political context is included here to situate the model of *Managing School Choice*. The historical and sociological contexts further inform the theory but are too lengthy to be included in this paper.

The focus of the current debate about educational choice has been centred on the concept of public versus private schools, particularly since the Federal Government has made two substantial changes in policy that have affected the non-government schooling sector. The first change was the abolition of the New Schools Policy (NSP) which

> ... removed Commonwealth minimum enrolment requirements and other funding restrictions placed on new non-government schools which had the effect of constraining the growth in numbers of new schools in that sector. From 1997 new non-government schools have mainly to satisfy State and Territory Government registration requirements to be eligible for Commonwealth recurrent funding. The number of new school applications approved nearly trebled in the first year of the NSP's abolition but since then these numbers have stabilised to those similar to pre-1997 (Harrington & Winter, 2002).

The second major change related to the way in which the non-government sector received Commonwealth Funds.

> On 11 May 1999, the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the Hon Dr David Kemp MP, announced a major reform of Australian Government funding arrangements for non government schools from 2001. These arrangements are based on a measure of the socioeconomic status (SES) of school communities (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005).

The trend for Commonwealth funding to have an "increasing proportionate share for the non-government school sector, is expected to continue (Harrington & Winter, 2002, p. 2). This is further evidenced by the joint statement presented by the Prime Minister and the Minster for Education, Science and Training:

> In every year of the Howard Government, a new record for school funding has been established. This legislation will continue this pattern. ... Many parents contribute to the cost of their children's education and, for most, this is a considerable commitment representing great personal sacrifice. Overall, state schools enrol 68 per cent of students and receive 76 per cent of public funds for schooling, while non-government schools enrol 32 per cent of students and receive 24 per cent of public funds (Department of Education Science and Training, 2004).

Under the new SES-based funding model more equitable funding can occur as the model provides a better way to measure "the ability of a non-government school community to support their school" (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005). The Catholic systemic schools were exempted from this funding model as the system had been funded as a block, allowing system authorities to distribute funds to individual schools according to their own assessments of need (Angus, 2003). Within the Catholic system this has meant that funding to the neediest communities will be significantly increased and this has been exemplified in Western Australia by the introduction in 2005 of the Health Care Card Tuition Fee Discount Scheme in all Catholic schools. The aims of the scheme are two fold – "to reduce the financial burden on families with limited financial resources currently in the System, and to reduce the financial barrier that prevents Catholic families from accessing a Catholic education" (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, 2006). The new SES-based funding model only relates to non-government schools, as the funding for government schools is "predominantly the responsibility of the State/Territory Governments" (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005).

The most rapidly growing component within the non-government sector is currently the expanding group of non-Catholic denominational schools that charge medium fees. So rapid has this expansion been that now more than 30% of the school age children in Western Australia are educated outside the government system (NCEC Annual Report, 2004). The sector has grown from 4% of total school enrolments in 1970 to 12% in 2004 (Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2006). This is clearly presented by the Australian Bureau of Statistics:

> Overall, the proportion of full-time students attending government schools fell from 72% in 1991 to 69% in 2001. This shift was the result of a 19% increase in the number of full-time students attending non-government schools, compared with a 1% increase in the number of students attending government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

The recent changes to federal government funding of non-government schools have come under close scrutiny from different sections of the community. One view contends that the changes have produced inequitable and unreasonable outcomes because "the Howard government has pursued a policy designed to smooth the way for the establishment of new private schools and to enable enrolments in existing ones to grow" (Nicholls, 2004). The debate brings into renewed focus some of the historically orientated divisions that bedevilled the earliest days of European settlement in Australia and which are still held by some as a fearful possibility.

> The history of relationships between government and non-government school sectors has not always been positive. The policies of the current Commonwealth Government and particularly the former education Minister sharpen these divisions. Some common ground needs to be found to avoid reopening the bitter divisions of the past. (Minister for Education, 2002)

Analysts and commentators investigating the balance between government and non-government schooling evidence an awareness of such historical divisions. As stated in the Review of Non-Government Schools in NSW, (Grimshaw, 2004, p. 6), "there is no issue more sensitive or contentious than school funding." Preston (2004), in her paper, "Choice and National Schools Policy", reminds her readers of the monopoly that Victorian non-government schools had on matriculation early in the twentieth century. She also notes "Australia is unique internationally for providing high levels of public funding to nongovernment *(sic)* schools that charge fees and do not accept all comers" (Preston, 2004, p. 2). Preston's claim is actually incorrect as international data on school choice shows that countries such as the former Soviet Union have fully funded school choice including religious schools and specialised schools with specific agenda (Heyneman, 1997). In her critique, Preston explores the 'positional good' that choice of schooling provides, and criticises the position taken by DEST that holds that funding of non-government schools will have no effect on government schools, and makes evident the intensity of debate that still surrounds the political aspects of choice of schooling.

Anderson (1993) presents further criticisms in his examination of the implications of the privatisation of schools in Australia that was occurring in the early 1990s. He contended that the increase of Federal funding to non-government schools would reduce the government school sector to "a welfare safety net, having residual responsibility for educating those children not wanted by the private sector or whose parents are unable to arrange access: children with handicaps and children of the poor" (1993, p.198). A decade later, however, this predicted outcome has not eventuated.

Angus (2003) lists four primary instruments that the federal government has used to expand and diversify the non-government school sector in order to extend choice of schooling:

- A mechanism that redirects federal funding from public to private systems.
- The abolition of federal restrictions on the establishment of new private schools.
- The revision of mechanism for recurrent private school funding.
- Public reporting of school performance.

And, moreover, although the movement of enrolments to the non-government schools has continued to increase, the number of newly established schools in this sector is currently proportionately lower than when the New Schools Policy was introduced in 1985 (Angus, 2003).

Plank and Sykes (2003) address school choice internationally and document the widespread nature of the move to give parents more choice about their children's education. Even though evidence that school choice policies are still only "provisional and equivocal, even in countries where choice policies have been in place for some time, … the move toward choice and competition in national education systems appears inexorable" (2003, p. ix).

In most industrialised countries overseas, the change focus has been on the "identification of the optimal distribution of authority in the provision of educational services given certain fundamental values and policy objectives" (Beare & Boyd, 1993, p. 231). In Australia, however, such optimal distribution is yet to be achieved and continues to be a point of debate between federal and state governments and parents and teachers.

Methodology

The grounded theory method produces a theory by collecting and analysing data obtained from participants who share in a similar problem or concern that is situated in a particular context (Charmaz, 2000). From the rich information derived (in this study, mainly from transcribed interviews) a theory of choice-making is generated by systematically uncovering the meanings behind what the participants have said about the choices they have made, the factors that influenced those decisions, and their guided reflections on the outcomes experienced. Through painstaking application of the grounded theory method, the present study has sought to discover, within its transcribed interview data, the common essence of the processes each family engaged in as they took decisions or made choices to resolve their concerns about their children's secondary schooling or to realise their family ambitions and aspirations.

Grounded theory method, properly and fully implemented, requires that the researcher "collect and analyse data from the natural world" (Chenitz, 1986, p. 79), its purpose being to "understand the concerns, actions, and behaviours of a group and explain those patterns of behaviour at a higher level of abstraction, a theory" (Chenitz, 1986, p. 79). Once data has been collected from the natural setting, it is analysed through the use of coding procedures. As Locke, (1996, p. 123) asserts, "at each level the theory becomes more refined, yielding a parsimonious integration of abstract concepts that cover behavioural variation".

For this particular study into school choice, data was collected from 39 participants using formal, unstructured, interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the data then open coded so that each piece of data was named. Such coding began as soon as the first interview had been transcribed. As interviews continued and more open coding was applied, similar ideas were grouped into concepts by constantly comparing incident to incident.

For such data to be analysed, the researcher must develop theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is a personal quality of the researcher that is a consequence of the researcher's awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Such awareness gives the informed researcher an "ability to generate concepts from data and to relate them according to the normal models of

theory in general, and theory development in sociology, in particular" (Glaser, 1992, p. 27). Researchers with this ability will be able to conceptualise their data to the highest levels of theoretical abstraction, taking its significance well beyond that of a merely rich description of a substantive area.

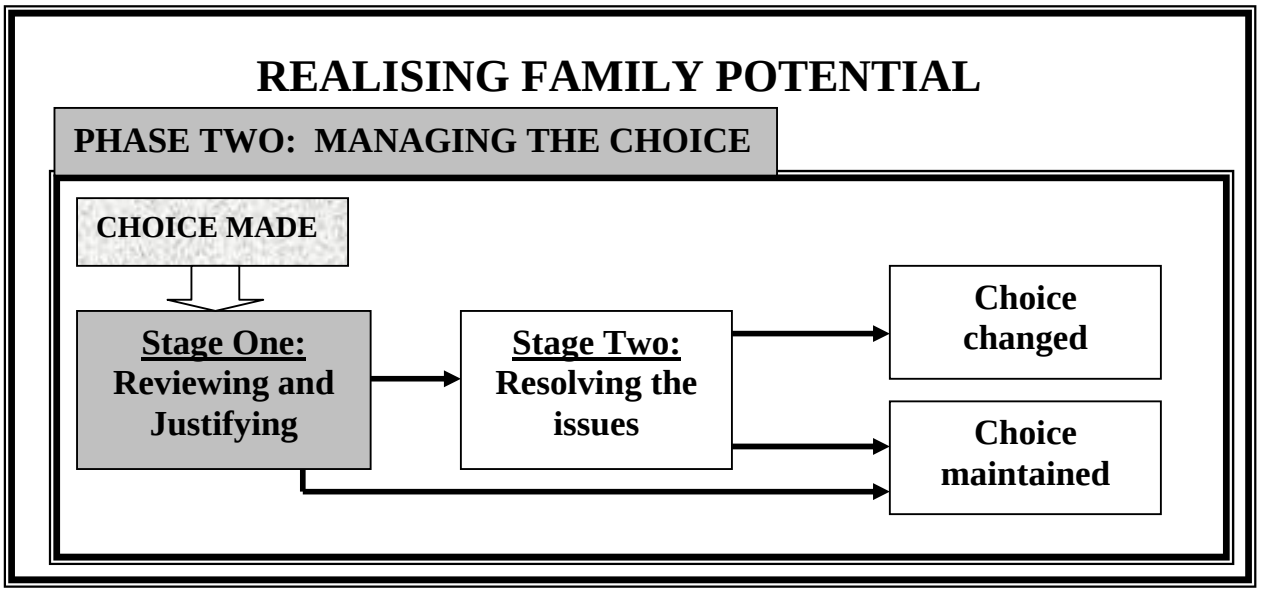
Theoretical sampling, which depends on and derives from theoretical sensitivity is "the further collection of data for coding and analysis guided by the identified categories and the generated interpretations or ideas" (Irurita, 1996, p. 6). These categories and interpretations are then used to "direct further data collection, from which the codes are further theoretically developed with respect to their various properties and their connections with other codes until saturated" (Glaser, 1978, p. 36). The theoretical sampling process interacts continually and cumulatively with the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher to produce an emerging theory. This intrinsic relationship underlines the importance of interweaving data collection with data analysis. "Each feeds into the other thereby increasing insight and recognition of the parameters of the evolving theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 43). The theory evolves as the categories are described and substantiated from the data and then further abstracted into higher level codes to produce a core category that is the very centre of the process, in this instance, of school choice.

Although grounded theory has many variations, the research presented in this paper, used the grounded theory method as originally described by Glaser and Strauss and later developed by others (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1997; Charmaz, 2000; Irurita, 1996), and defined two basic social processes that occurred when parents engaged in making choices about their children's schooling. The first process described how the families made a decision about schooling for their children and was named *Making the Choice*. This paper describes the second process, *Managing the Choice* that concerns families' management of the choice they have taken to enrol a student in a particular school and their ongoing evaluation of the efficacy of the original decision. When a family makes a decision to place their child in a particular school, their quest for the fulfilment of family potential has, in an important sense, just begun. Clearly, the decision to place a child in a school has not itself delivered the potential they are seeking to realise through the schooling of their child; it has only put the child onto a path which, in the light of what is known at the time, appears to offer the best prospects for fulfilment as the child's ensuing educational experience unfolds. The ultimate efficacy of the original decision will reveal itself only over time and may well be threatened from time to time along the way if conditions or circumstances change or the experience turns out for some reason to be other than expected.

Throughout the interviews and the analysis of the data it was evident that participants were engaged in an ongoing process of reviewing the efficacy of their original enrolment choice, reflecting more or less continuously on the extent to which the experienced reality was continuing to align with the family's current expectations. At any point in the process, this reflection leads them either to reaffirm the appropriateness of the present situation and leave things as they are, seek to change conditions at the current school that seem to them to be threatening the child's best interests, or explore options for changing to another school.

Evidence from the interviews indicates that the maintenance of the original choice of school, or a decision to move the child elsewhere, is sometimes quite complicated and can cause significant strain on a family's resources. Moreover, not all participants in the study were equally concerned with or engaged consciously in the ongoing management of their original decision or its consequences. While some parents, for example, were extremely vigilant about the ongoing welfare and outcomes for their children, others appeared to be completely trusting in the professionals in whose care they had placed their children. The following discussion of *Managing the Choice* exposes the variety of ways in which parents engage in continuing reflection on the suitability of their original decision and an assessment of how well the child's current experiences are matching the family's expectations. Figure 1 depicts that this second phase of realising family potential can lead either to a maintenance of the original decision or a decision to change to another school.

Figure 2. **Phase Two within the basic social process**



As seen in Figure 2, the theoretical construct of this phase, managing the choice, emerged as two specific stages and each has been dealt with separately in this paper. The intervening conditions that affect the way in which each family manages the choices that they make in regard to secondary schooling requires Stage One and Stage Two to be dealt with separately. Describing the model in this way required the problems faced by families to be separated from the way in which the family managed to resolve those problems. While this necessitates some repetition of data, it allows the theoretical model to unfold with the best possible clarity.

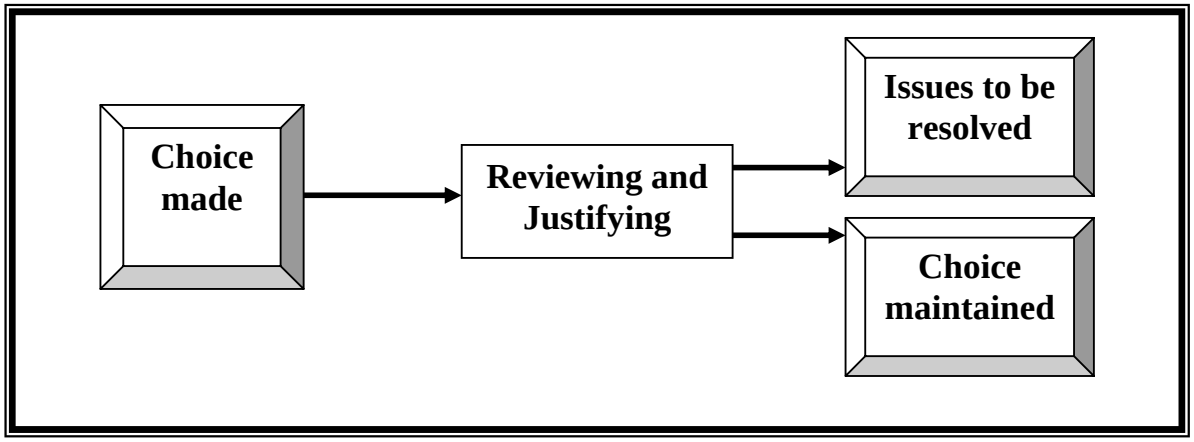
Stage One: Reviewing and Justifying the Choice

Reviewing and justifying are joint activities in which the family engages during the initial stage of managing their choice. If the parents are not able to justify the

continuation of their choice unchanged, their imperatives necessitate a change and they move to Stage Two where they resolve the issue and either change the enrolment or put strategies in place that can support the maintenance of the existing enrolment (Figure 3).

The interview data confirmed that where a family deemed their choice to have been efficacious, they were content to continue without change on the grounds that it was continuing to satisfy their imperatives, their availability issues, or the special needs of their child.

Figure 3: **Reviewing and justifying the choice**



Rosa and Greg were migrants and had established themselves in their professions in Perth. They had chosen a private boys' college for their son even though this was an uncommon choice in their country of origin. Even though they were confident of the choice that they had made, they evidently kept it under continuing review.

> *Fortunately he has thrived in the environment and we have carefully monitored his progress along the way. If we were not happy we would have made a change. Making this decision was a stressful time but once it was made we were prepared to support the decision as long as our son benefited. He is currently in Year 12, a school prefect, house captain and a grade A student!*

Suzanne, a trained teacher, was determined to make sure that her children had the best education possible. Their original concerns had settled around the need for a "good school" that was close to where they were living. Proximity was a key issue, as she wanted to be involved on many levels in the children's schooling. Financially, Suzanne had the opportunity to stay at home to care for the children's needs and she felt strongly that this was an important ingredient of successful parenting. She and her husband had chosen a nearby boys' college for the secondary schooling of their two boys and were clearly very pleased with the result.

> *[Our eldest] is in the First Eleven. He's done extremely well in his schooling. Both kids were lucky enough to be*

> *Head Boys in the junior school… Academically they're doing very well. [Our eldest] was lucky enough to be Dux of the year. Again I take it that the school's done well, but then he's got a particular talent as well….I suppose if he went somewhere else, he might do just as well – who knows? But my sort of thinking is that because it's a boys' school, the school itself is excellent… these kids, as I said, have flourished. But again, I take a personal interest and keep a tab on things.*

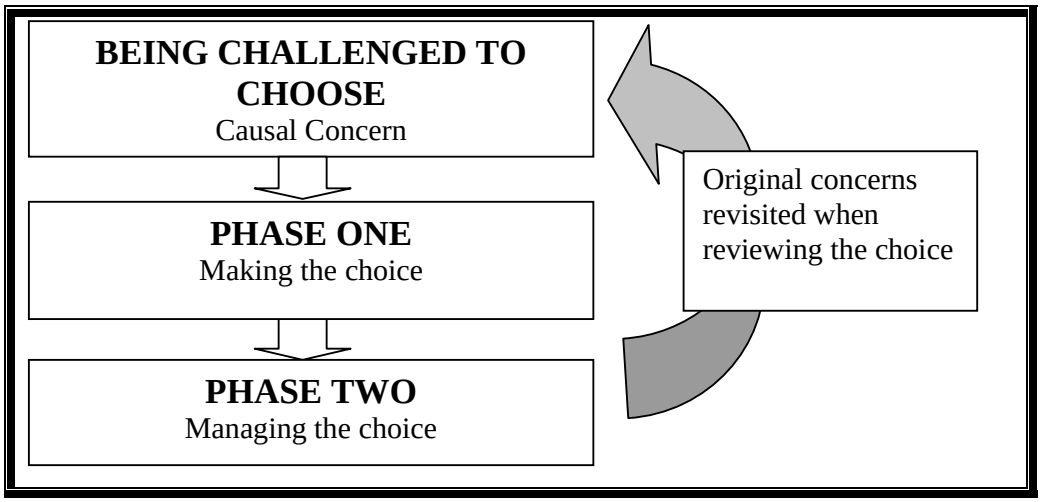
Michelle and David had originally been very anti-elitist in their attitude to schooling but were confronted by their second son's particularly challenging learning difficulties. Eventually they had chosen a Catholic secondary college for their son as their principle concern called for a situation where his fine motor skills deficiency could be met by the support unit provided within the school. They wanted him to be cared for and stimulated in those other areas where he was capable in order that he could achieve the potential he had.

> *We wanted him to do some music because he actually is quite musical. We started him on keyboard but he wasn't able to, the fine motor skills were quite difficult with that and we looked at other kinds of instruments, so we went along and we talked over with the music department about what he could do and they tested him and they came back and said that his pitch and his musicality is excellent, he is really very, innately musical, and then they suggested that maybe he learn voice which is just wonderful…it gets away from the fine motor stuff and I was just so thrilled that that's, that's, a real breakthrough in one sense…He's having private tuition, his voice has actually broken or in the process of breaking so he's going to start learning voice stuff and he's just really enjoying it enormously...and that opens up a whole new range of things. That's just brilliant.*

Michelle and David were pleased that the special needs of their second son, the reason why they chose a Catholic secondary college for him, were being cared for in a significant way, and reaffirmed for them the efficacy of their choice.

The evidence discussed above indicates that when a family reviews their choice of school they typically do so in terms of the original concerns that had challenged them to make that choice (Figure 4). The particular selections included above reveal families who, in their review, were clearly sufficiently satisfied with the continuing efficacy of their choice that they have continued with their original enrolment. However, not all families were content to leave the original decision alone. Intervening conditions, for instance, can sometimes cause a family to move into a subsequent stage in the management of their choice, as is discussed in the next section.

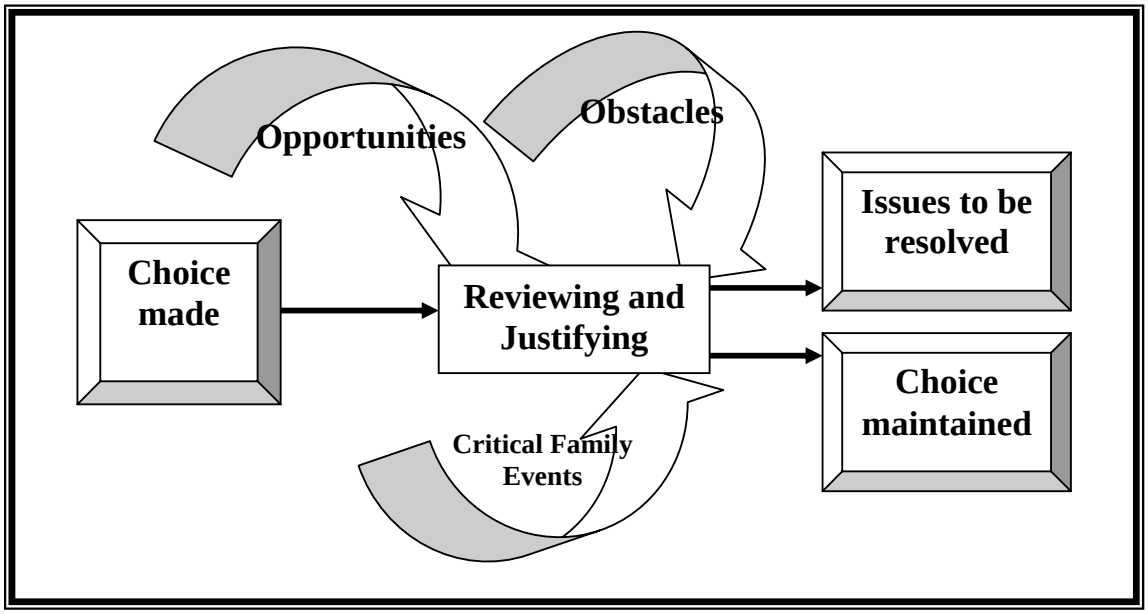
Figure 4. **Relationship Phase Two to the original causal concern**



Intervening Conditions in Stage One

If, and when, obstacles were presented, the family would usually engage initially in strategies aimed at resolving the issue and thus allowing them to remain with their current choice of enrolment. Where the issue was of a level that challenged the family equilibrium, the family typically had to review their imperatives, (those things that they considered essential to their family character) and possibly make choices about available resources and their capacity to overcome the problem. Depending on the outcome of this review, the family would then decide to either change or maintain their choice. In other instances, opportunities were offered or critical incidents occurred within the family that caused them to carefully review the child's, or children's, current enrolment. Such obstacles, opportunities or critical events occur as intervening conditions in the management of the choice (Figure 5). When one or more of the intervening conditions identified in Figure 5 are present, the family must move to the next stage, namely to resolve the issue. The intervening conditions that affect the family sufficiently to cause them to need such resolution are discussed separately below, and the resolution of their difficulties is presented in Stage Two. The resolutions of the issues presented from the data are presented separately as it gives greater clarity to the theory developed from this research.

Figure 5. **Intervening conditions within Stage One in Phase Two**



Obstacles presented

Some families experienced obstacles that presented difficulties for the maintenance of their choice. Mary and Gerard, for instance, were raising a large family in the country. For each of their children they expended considerable time and energy in deciding which Year 11 and 12 schooling would be optimal. Their sixth son was to go to a boys' boarding school in the city where their fourth son had excelled in every way. Having a completely different personality, however, had made boarding school life extremely difficult for the sixth son. He suffered a great deal of bullying from the beginning of his enrolment in Year 11 and was ostracised by the other boys in his year group as the hero status of his older brother was still very evident in the upper school cohort. In the middle of the year, the tragic death of a Year 11 student eased the situation as the associated pastoral care initiatives produced a more cohesive and compassionate group of students. At the beginning of Year 12 he was once again in difficulties and by midway through the year he was clinically depressed and required medication.

> *Year 12 kicked off and he just seemed to go straight into depression. Even though he wasn't dreading going back to Year 12, within a couple of weeks he was back into the same sort of depressed state as he was at the beginning of Year 11.*

Such an obstacle caused the family to carefully reconsider their choice and the result of this reflection is presented later in this paper where the final stage is described.

Critical family events

Eileen had many challenges in her life as she had a disabled husband and four children and had to maintain employment to keep them all. She was very committed to keeping them at Catholic schools as that is where she was most comfortable. Her husband was supportive, although not actively so. Eileen and her family continued to enjoy the benefits of living near to the Catholic school and being part of its parish community. They felt it was particularly important for their second child to be in the school as she had been born with a congenital difficulty and had already had substantial medical intervention. However, an accident at the school where he child was pushed in the classroom while the teacher was absent became a critical incident that intervened to challenge her initial confidence.

> *One day we got a phone call and they said that my daughter had been injured and I should come down to the school. When I got there -- I get really angry. She should have called an ambulance. Why they didn't call an ambulance, I don't know. So firstly, I don't believe the duty of care was followed through. She was sitting in the front office and she had a tea-towel on her mouth. So they didn't actually ignore it. She had braces on her teeth. If she hadn't had braces on her teeth, every one of the teeth in her mouth would have been on the ground. They were dislodged. Every tooth in her mouth was only in her mouth because of the dentures. When she opened her mouth and I could see this, I was nearly hysterical.*

Eileen had serious concerns about every aspect of the accident. The specialist who was called cast doubt upon the school's version of events, as it seemed unlikely that a push in a classroom could have resulted in such an extreme injury to the child's mouth. Permanent damage had resulted. The wrong emergency number had been rung, no ambulance had been called, there was no teacher in the room at the time of the incident, the child was left alone with her injuries while the principal comforted the perpetrator. Over the next few weeks and months, no support was offered to the family by the school even though their daughter had to have emergency surgery. There was no adequate insurance cover and different groups within the parish and school would not communicate compassionately with Eileen. This critical incident put the suitability and efficacy of their school choice in serious doubt and presented them with an issue to resolve.

Opportunities presented

George and his wife particularly wanted their children to have life long learning and had made different choices for different children in the family. George described how a new opportunity had led him to change the enrolment of his youngest child. Although the child's older siblings had attended secondary school at a Christian College, she had been enrolled at the local government high school because it had advertised a dance program that would, George believed, suit her particular passion for dancing in ways that would not have been possible at the Christian school her older brother and sister had attended. She was maintaining a B average academically as well as being heavily involved in the school's dance program and in a private dance studio that was some distance away. However, it

was difficult for her parents to transport her to and from the studio after hours and she was relying on public transport. “She ended up having to catch two buses and a train”. Fortunately, because of her excellence in dancing and leadership, a Catholic College near to the dance studio offered her a scholarship that covered the school fees.

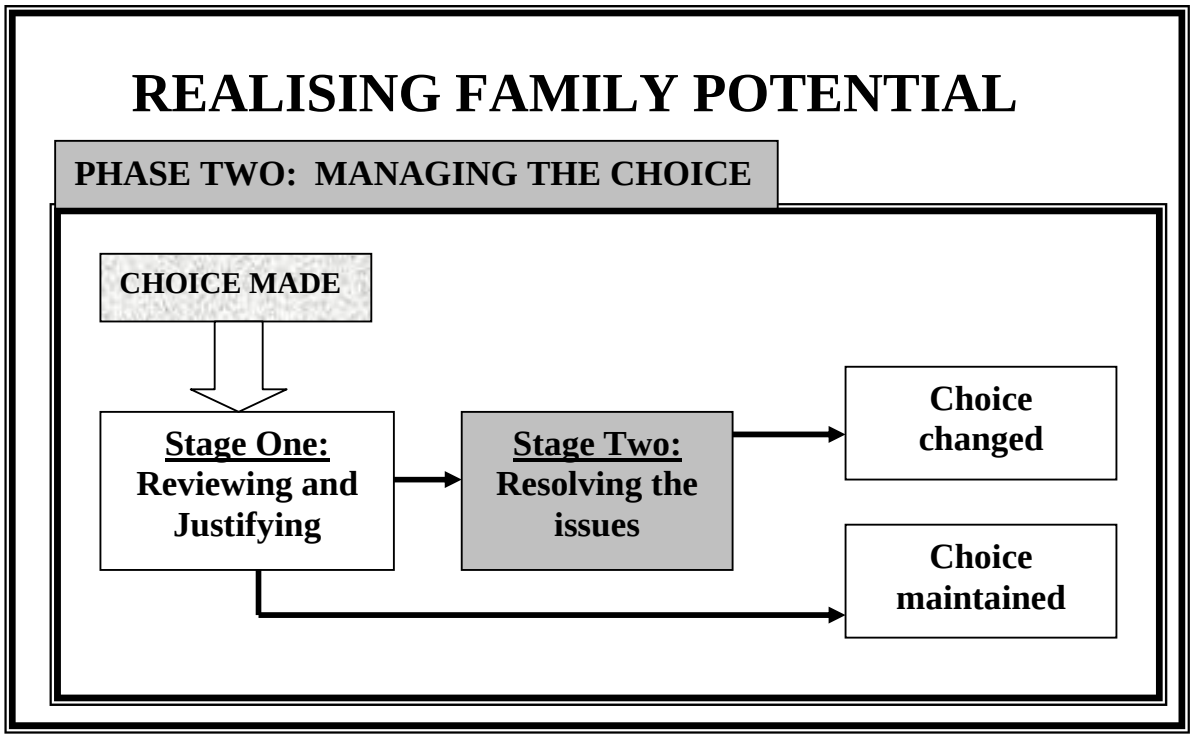
> *That was based on the fact that several of the students at a particular ballet school that she was going to were already students at [the Catholic College] and had mentioned her to the deputy principal who happened to visit the ballet school one night and sent us a letter saying, or gave her a letter to bring home saying we’d like you to come to [our college] and lead our dance program.*

George and his family were faced with the need to resolve the issues that such an opportunity raised.

Stage Two: Resolving the Issues

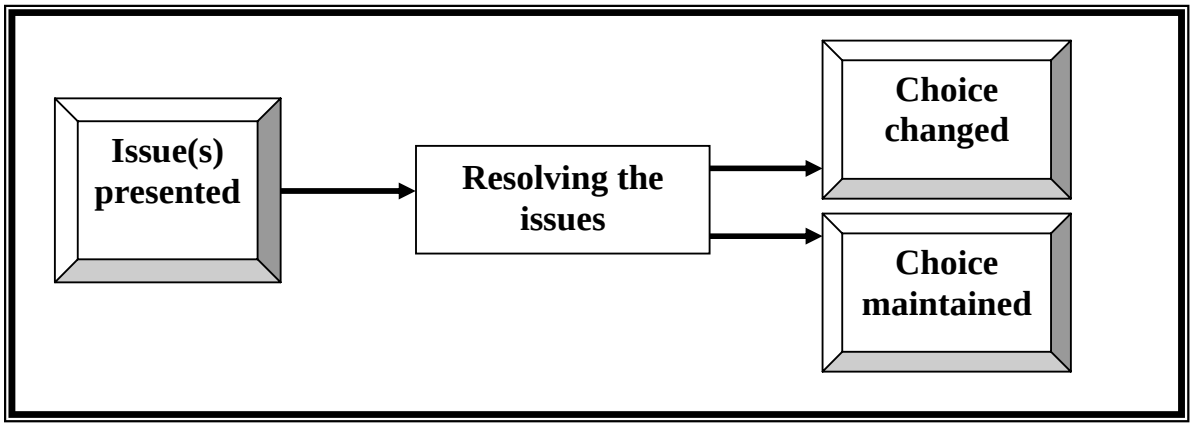
As depicted in Figure 6, families move towards resolving issues when they have been presented with obstacles, critical family events or opportunities that change the way in which they view the suitability or efficacy of the choice they have made. When the process of reviewing and justifying reveals no challenges that are sufficiently serious to encourage the parents to consider change, they typically implement support practices to counteract whatever difficulties had been presented and thereby resolve the issue with the need for a change of school.

Figure 6. **Stage Two within Phase Two**



As seen in the cases described previously, some challenges require substantial efforts for the resolution of the issues (Figure 7). Through Stage One where the reviewing and justifying process is engaged, the parents either choose to maintain the current enrolment through providing extra support systems, or move to Stage Two where they will be resolving the issues that have been presented. How the issues are resolved depends on the particular conditions that intervene during the resolution process.

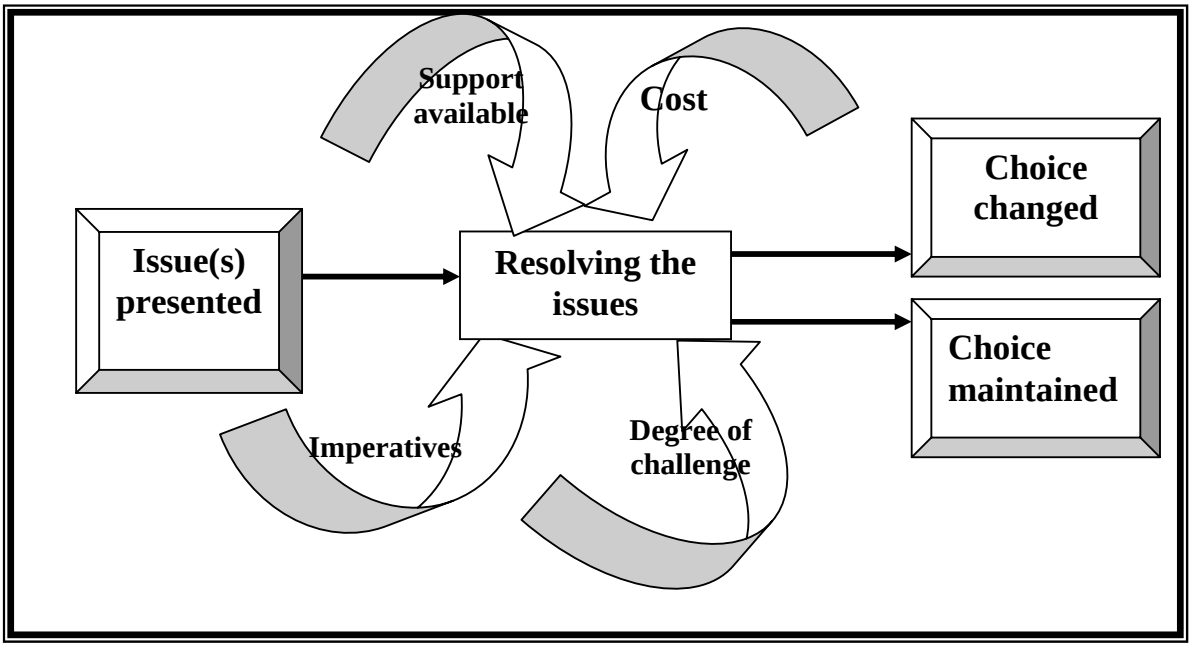
Figure 7. **Resolving the issues**



Data from the interviews indicate that four intervening conditions affect a family's resolution of the issue confronting them at this stage: support available, cost (financial, social and opportunity costs), imperatives, and degree of challenge. Support can come from a variety of sources such as the family, school pastoral care system, extended family and resources within the wider community. A decision to change can have financial, social and opportunity consequences. Financially, change of enrolment can mean extra costs in administration fees, extended travel, new uniforms and books. Social cost may be evident when relationships within the school community are broken, new relationships are needed, and previous support networks are lost. Opportunity costs could occur where subject choices are not available in the new school and a different and unfamiliar school culture is encountered reducing the child's capacity to achieve academically. Imperatives that have been refined by the family can be challenged and face further refinement, or else indicate that a change of enrolment must be made. The degree of the challenge, and the family's resources available to face that challenge, will be very influential in the resolution of the issue. The family might need to deal with more than one intervening condition as they resolve the issue, or issues, that they faced in the maintenance of their enrolment.

In the following section, the issues that needed to be resolved in the examples presented above are dealt with in terms of the intervening condition that was most influential and this has been displayed in Figure 8. As many of the families are influenced in this phase by more than one condition, their movement in the process is either facilitated or constrained by the particular conditions that occur within the context of the management of their choice of schooling (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 103).

Figure 8. **Intervening conditions related to resolving the issues**



Support available

As described previously, Mary and Gerard were deeply concerned about their son in Year 12 as he was suffering clinical depression due to being bullied and ostracised at the boarding school that he attended. The social and opportunity costs that would be incurred by moving to another school at this time were considered to be too great, as his Year 12 matriculation was at stake. Another alternative was to rest for the remainder of the year and return the next year to matriculate, but the loss of the value of the studies already undertaken plus the energy required to recommence was considered too high. However, Mary was able to engage sufficient resources to support him in a way in which he could succeed in his quest to finish his matriculation and survive. Change of school was not necessary, but withdrawal from the boarding facility and arranging for accommodation with a friend who lived near to the school, was critical..

> *Three weeks into third term, we pulled him out of boarding school. It was either that or come home and quit Year 12, if we wanted to save Year 12 at all. By that stage the doctor had finally won the day and put him on antidepressants. He was home for a couple of weeks until they kicked in and then he was on those. We arranged accommodation for him with a friend of [our older son's] who lived [locally]- so he was riding his bike to school. He became a day scholar. Within a few weeks, he actually started to find some friends, thank God. It was touch and go for a while, whether he was going to sink or swim. He had the help of this young fellow, his brother's friend, who was 27 or 28, a happy sort of guy who kind of gee'd him up a bit. Then I suppose the antidepressants helped a bit. He started to find some friends. It was the*

> *best thing of all when the friends started calling around for him on a Friday night and taking him out somewhere for a couple of hours. It wasn't anything major, but the contact was just brilliant.*

At this point the bullying issues and depression were sufficiently resolved to be able to maintain the boy's enrolment as a day student. A further crisis presented itself as the Year 12 exam period approached and it was once again necessary to change living circumstances so that support was available to keep him sufficiently buoyant to complete his exams to the best of his potential.

> *Then for the exams, in fourth term I went up there. We used to get hold of a unit for a few weeks that belonged to some farmer down south. They rented it to us for that limited space of time…he was very much on the edge. It was on a knife-edge, just balancing between trying to keep him focused on the work. Actually he took himself off the antidepressants in the study break in October. He decided that he couldn't study. Okay, they improved his frame of mind a bit but they fogged up his brain too much and he couldn't focus on the study. So he said, "I'm going to have to go off them because I can't do TEE in this frame of mind. My brain just will not do it." Again that was a bit of a knife-edge situation, going off them.*

Mary was able to continue living in the city to support her son through the exam period where he needed to focus all his resources despite his battle with depression. The support that Mary was able to offer, even though needing high level personal and economic resources, was sufficient to resolve the problem and no change of school was necessary.

Cost

Choosing different schools for different children in the same family was, in some instances, a direct reflection on the schooling experience of an older child, in that even though the older child was not moved, different choices were now made for subsequent children. Choosing a new school for the younger child meant substantial change for the whole family, this was usually not done with ease and often required a high level of engagement of family resources. Some families instead worked hard to stay with their original choice, as this seemed to them to be a better option overall than to make a change.

For families that had moved from overseas for what they saw as the educational advantage available to their children in Australia, the opportunity to change an initial enrolment was often very limited, given the sheer magnitude of the relocation and other costs that had already been borne. Maura and Pat, for example, were the only members of their extended family who had migrated to Australia. On arrival they knew very little of the Australian culture of choice in schooling but were strongly aware that they wanted their two sons to be imbued with their Catholic faith in their schooling as well as through the family

experience. The school also provided a strong army cadets program, which the family found quite a paradox and distinctly in contrast to their cultural origins. However, to make changes would have meant engaging in a difficult process because they were already dealing with the major change of migration and so they maintained their enrolment, particularly since their son had established some valuable friendships. Nevertheless, the contrast in values experienced during their eldest son's schooling had been of sufficient concern that they felt they needed to consider a different choice for their much younger second son.

Their minds were effectively made up by the time their younger son was ready to start school and they were determined to try something very different. Pat and Maura felt that having decided to change they could now really move towards their ideal and engage all their resources even though this choice would incur high level costs. Given that their older son had finished school and was pursuing his own tertiary studies, they decided to move interstate to access a Montessori school.

> *It's like Paradise. We've never, since the day he's gone [to the Montessori school] … had a day when we weren't thankful that he can go there.*

Degree of challenge

As described previously in the section on critical family events, Eileen was faced with a very difficult situation to resolve when her second daughter was seriously injured in a classroom accident. The school community failed to support the family in their distress and behaved in a defensive manner.

> *There were a lot of things, and this thing that there was no insurance, this thing that there were no accidents on the ground. I felt very isolated. There was no parent support, there was no information in the school that this had happened. I wanted to go to the school board and talk about it. [The Principal] drilled it into me and told me that I was not allowed to approach the school board…*

While the perceived serious lack of support from the school was an intervening condition in relation to Eileen's capacity to resolve the issue, the greatest impetus came from the sheer magnitude of the stress and disappointment she had experienced over the school's response to the incident involving her daughter. The classroom incident where her daughter had been injured became too difficult to manage in every aspect. The lack of support experienced, the serious challenge to the family's imperatives and the cost already involved in sending the children to a Catholic school were all serious considerations, but it was the level of distress caused by the size of this particular challenge that eventually convinced Eileen that she needed to change her children's school enrolment to the local government school.

Eileen was under a great deal of pressure in being the sole provider for a family of four children and a disabled husband. However, the most difficult part for Eileen was her fear that it would happen again. While waiting for her children on another day she saw an incident, similar to what had happened when her daughter was injured. The same classroom teacher was allowing the children into the classroom unsupervised and she felt that this had been the critical factor in her daughter's injury. Eileen engaged the help of the social worker to see if the issues could be resolved as she evidently had an underlying hope that a positive resolution was possible.

The degree of challenge was too great for Eileen to resolve at that particular time and, even though her extended family were distressed by her intention to move her children from the Catholic school, she proceeded with the change to government education.

Imperatives

As described earlier, an important aspect of school choice is a family's understanding of what they consider essential to their own character, their imperatives.

Anne and Michael were presented with an obstacle that also required resolution through the management of their choice of schooling. They had enrolled all their children in Catholic schools as the development of their faith life was very important. However, as their two youngest children's academic progress was not to their satisfaction, they came to feel that they could fulfil the faith aspect themselves and concentrate on resolving the academic issues separately. A change in Anne's professional life was also a contributing factor as she then had the time available to make home schooling an option, at least for their critical middle-schooling years, for resolving the issues that concerned them.

> *I started home-schooling because about five or six years ago I had a major crisis at work… … 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.*

They spent six months deciding whether taking them out of school for their two or three middle school years would be an advantage or disadvantage, as they also had to consider whether they would be able to enrol them in the Catholic high school of their choice for Year 9 onwards when home school would no longer be viable.

> *They were in Year 6. They'd started Year 6. I said, "Why don't we look into it?" We took six months to look into it. We took quite a few mental health days off school to go and suss things out, because if we did it - I said that if you come out, more than likely, you won't be able to get back into that school. So if you're going to do it, we're probably going to have to look at doing it until you finish primary school, because someone else will probably come in and take your place. You wouldn't want to go*

> *just to the school down the road; you wouldn't want to go to another school, so we'd really need to look at it. And you'd need to really be wanting to do it and we'd need to be really sure that that's what we wanted to do. It took us six months to decide that.*

In their "mental health days off" Anne and the twins were able to work through the issues that would challenge them in the choice for home schooling.

> *… you can become compatible. You just have to understand each other. We did that and they decided that yes, [home schooling] would be a good idea and they wanted to do it. They were both quite keen. So then we did. They liked it. When it got to Year 8 … We were saying, "Okay, so what do you want to do? I'd be prepared to continue if you wanted to, but it's up to you." Just finishing primary school, they both realised - [She] had completely decided she was no good at maths but she realises she can do maths. They can do anything. They know that they can do anything if they want to, if they can apply themselves and if it's interesting enough. The family's educational imperatives were thus refined to the point that the children's achievement of academic potential became a more important determiner of the choice of mode of schooling given that other options were available for accommodating the faith development imperative.*

George's daughter, Grace, had an opportunity presented that became an intervening factor when the school choice was being reviewed and justified. She had been invited to move from her local government high school and take up a scholarship at a Catholic secondary school in order to lead the school's dance program. George was determined that it should not disadvantage her as the family's foremost imperative was to get a good education that would lead to life long learning.

> *I was a bit ambivalent about it. But, as long as, I was very clear with my daughter, in fact I'd made her do an absolute promise, that if she didn't maintain her B average she was out of there and back at a school where she was going to maintain a B average.*
> *I wasn't uncomfortable with it. The [college] had had a long reputation at being good at, across the board of a wide range of things and they'd established scholarships in various areas … So they actually offered full fee scholarships to people who could enhance the school in those areas.*
>
> *Well, of course she did maintain her B average, I mean this was quite surprising when kids are in the middle of a vigorous rehearsal thing and they just plonk themselves down and grab a history book out of the bag and start*

> *studying, you know, and that was the way they did their study. There was a whole environment of excellence … in the dance which translated itself to the study. Like there was a peer group there that was operating.*

With the maintenance of their imperative for life long learning being unthreatened, the opportunity was accepted and the situation was resolved with a change of enrolment.

Conclusion

This paper has described how families manage the school choices that they have made for their children. The political background for these choices has also been described so that the model, produced by the grounded theory method, can be clearly seen within its context. The theoretical model produced by the grounded theory shows that in order for families to realise their family potential through choices in education they enter into a process that has two phases: *making the choice* and *managing the choice*. This paper has described the second phase of the choice. Families continue to review and justify their choice of schooling and where there are issues to be resolved they make a decision to either remain with their choice or to change their choice. In doing so they are influenced by the support that is available through their own resources or the school's resources, the costs involved, the influence of their own imperatives and the degree of challenge that has been confronted them.

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Appendix 1

Choice of Schooling Research in Australia			
Author	**Date**	**Title**	**Method**
Joseph H. Fichter	1958	Parochial school: A sociological study	Quantitative study
Helen Praetz	1974	Where shall we send them?	Quantitative
Helen Praetz	1982	Public policy and Catholic schools	Historical analysis
ACT Schools Authority	1985	Choice of School in the ACT. Parents Have Their Say	Quantitative
Geoffery Partington	1988	Why parents are choosing independent schools	Quantitative
Peter Carpenter and John Western	1992	Choosing non-government secondary schooling	Quantitative
Marcellin Flynn	1993	The culture of Catholic schools	Quantitative
Kelvin Canavan	1994	Why do parents choose a Catholic school?	Quantitative
Ruth Weston	1998	Quality of school life in government, Catholic and other private secondary schools	Quantitative
Irving Saulwick and Denis Muller for Association of Independent Schools of Victoria	1998	What parents want from their children's education in independent schools	Quantitative
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
Peter Cuttance and Shirley A. Stokes	2000	Reporting on student and school achievement	Quantitative
Bill Sultmann	2000	Future Catholic school research project	Quantitative
Catholic Education Office Toowoomba Diocese	2001	Examination of parent preference for schooling	Quantitative
Geri O'Keefe	2001	Family Faith and Life Survey	Quantitative
Claire Aitchison	2002	Mothers and School Choice – Managing Risk	Qualitative
Department of Education, Science and Training	2003	Parents' and community members' attitudes to schooling	Quantitative
Adrian Beavis and Australian Council for Educational Research	2004	Why parents choose private or public schools	Quantitative
Jonathan Kelley and MDR Evans	2004	Choice between government, Catholic, and independent schools: culture and community, rather than class	Quantitative
Lyndal Wilson - Independent Schools Council of Australia	2004	School choice in Australia: research overview	Literature review
Chris Ryan and Louise Watson	2004	The drift to private school in Australia: Understanding its features	Quantitative
Sensis®	2004	Sensis® Consumer Report	Quantitative