Realising Family Potential Through Choice of Schooling

Angela McCarthy
University of Notre Dame Australia, amccarthy@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/edu_conference

Part of the Education Commons

REALISING FAMILY POTENTIAL THROUGH CHOICE OF SCHOOLING

Abstract

School choice is an issue that continues to stimulate energetic debate. Realising Family Potential Through Choice of Schooling is a theory that was developed to explain the process in which families engage to make educational choices. The grounded theory method was used to build the theory and showed that parents were challenged to make educational choices outside of the free government education system for a range of reasons. The grounded theory method provided the necessary rigour to develop a thoroughly robust and parsimonious theory that explains the process of educational choice. There were some surprises in the development of the final theory as it also involved the management of the choice and the dimensions of change.

Dr Angela McCarthy
University of Notre Dame Australia
amccarthy@nd.edu.au
08 9433 0214
Introduction

The theory that was developed in the research reported in this paper, presents a highly conceptualised grounded model that gives a comprehensive understanding of what a family does when challenged to make choices about their children's schooling. The social process that is presented does not end with a result, but rather uncovers the meanings inherent in the activities in which parents engage when making decisions about school choice. This theoretical model, which is completely grounded in actual data, is a new theory of decision-making in education. The research was specifically contextualised within the Western Australian educational environment and as such, presents unique characteristics. However, the issue of school choice does not exist in isolation. It has political, sociological, historical and, for those with an interest in religious based schooling, theological contexts that enable this research to be seen as part of a broader canvas of ideas and influences that are both national and international in their impact. For the purposes of this paper only the historical context will be described in detail. The grounded theory method is then described and the theory itself is explained. The paper concludes with a single diagram that presents the entire theory.

Historical Context

Eastern colonies

In the Sydney settlement it was not until 1805, 17 years after the First Fleet arrived, that a directive was given by the Secretary of State in England for public funds to be applied for the education of the colony's children (Fogarty, 1959). Much of the responsibility for teaching and management of education was placed in the hands of the Church of England, as it had been in England, but this proved unsatisfactory to other groups, particularly the Irish Catholics and the Dissenters, the latter being mainly Scottish Protestants (Fogarty, 1959). The Catholics, and the Scottish Presbyterians in particular, objected to the dominance of the Anglicans and were determined to preserve their denominations, as well as their own identities and cultures (Potts, 1999a). This began the serious social problem of sectarianism that gained momentum.

In its response, the government made grants of land available to the different denominations for the establishment of denominational schools, along with funds for salaries and buildings, and left the management of the schools to the various associated church groups (Fogarty, 1959). With sectarianism dividing the social fabric of education, land that had been set aside for education often had several different denominational schools side by side and the quality of the colony's schooling was compromised (Potts, 1999a). In the 1830s, state schools were established in the New South Wales colony, effectively creating from the earliest days a dual system of government and non-government schooling (Anderson, 1990).

Swan River Colony

The first 17 years of the Swan River Colony, later to become the State of Western Australia, had produced a variety of early attempts at educating its children (Mossenson, 1972), but none resulted in lasting institutions. The situation in Western Australia differed from the eastern colonies in that the
government had entered into education from the very beginning of the colony without significant opposition. Mossenson (1972) asserts that this was due to the weakness of the Protestant Churches and their lack of resources rather than any great strength of liberal principles.

The first government funded school in the Western Australian colony was established in the care of the colonial chaplain Reverend J.B. Wittenoom in July 1830 when the colony was only one year old with just over 1000 inhabitants (Fletcher, 1979, Mossenson, 1972). The colonial administration had recognised from the outset the need for its involvement in education, an unusual stance for the time. After several different attempts to maintain the school, however, “the records show that in the mid-thirties only a small proportion of the children of school age were actually in attendance” (Fletcher, 1979, p. 10). In 1838 Wittenoom established a Classical and English School with government assistance to cover the need for the classical education that would have been expected “within a middle-class family in Britain” (Fletcher, 1979, p. 10). However, with the retirement of Governor Stirling and the arrival of John Hutt in 1839, along with an economic depression, government funds were withdrawn and the school collapsed (Mossenson, 1972). Hutt insisted that the parents fund the schools. For those unable to pay for their education, the fees would be paid from the public purse. While this was suitable in England it did not suit the economic circumstances of the new colony and the lack of available education became a concern (Mossenson, 1972). Another difficulty for the early settlers in the colony was the lack of labour since it had begun as a free colony with no convict labour to assist in development. The Swan River Colony was proving to be a difficult environment in which to increase one’s prosperity and children were often diverted into labour rather than given an education. For instance, Samuel Moore, an early colonist, wrote, “A difficulty now arises . . . my children want schooling and I want pig-feeders and shepherds” (Austin, 1972, p. 90).

In 1843, Father John Brady arrived in the Swan River Colony from Sydney, having been sent by Bishop Polding to establish the Catholic Church in the new colony (Tannock, 1979, Bourke, 1979). He established the first Catholic primary school in Western Australia where about 30 children were educated by Brady’s associate, Father John Joostens. Brady subsequently left for Europe and in 1846 returned with a party of 27 missionaries with himself as “the newly-consecrated first Bishop of Perth” (Tannock, p. 124). Among the newly arrived missionaries were six Sisters of Mercy from Ireland who established within a month a “free school for the daughters of the European settlers, ‘without distinction of creed’” (Tannock, p. 125) that operated in conjunction with the boys school being run by Joostens. Brady formally applied for funding in 1846 from the colonial government but it “was refused by the new governor, Andrew Clarke” (Tannock, p. 125) who also resolved to set up a “government-financed public school system to counter the educational initiatives of Brady and the Sisters of Mercy” (Tannock, p. 125). Brady retaliated by petitioning the Colonial Office in London to intervene. Between 1846 and 1848 the Sisters of Mercy had established three schools in Perth and Fremantle and in 1848 the Colonial Office “ordered the governor to institute public grants for Catholic schools based upon population numbers”. A dual system of government-funded education was
established and educational choice has thus been a concern for Western Australian parents since the beginning of European settlement.

The experience of the eastern colonies, which had been established for around 50 years at this stage, was also influential. The religious and educational future of the Swan River Colony was already largely determined by the experiments and failures of New South Wales (Austin, 1972). In particular, the struggle for dominance of public education by the Anglican Church in the eastern colonies had encouraged impartiality on the part of the Swan River government from the beginning. Because it was a free settlement and not a penal colony there was no funding from England, as there had been elsewhere for the maintenance of a garrison and convicts. Consequently, the dreams of prosperity seemed at times to be unrealistic. Eventually, when the colony was recognised to be in serious economic peril, the British government acceded to the colony’s appeal for convict labour.

**Penal Labour in Western Australia**

With the introduction of penal labour into the Swan River Colony in 1850 (Mossenson, 1972, Tannock, 1975, 1979) the proportion of Catholics in the population increased as many Irish political prisoners were sent to the colony and by 1880 one-quarter of the community was Catholic. The parallel systems of education both flourished with the increased numbers but antagonism between the Irish Catholics and the English establishment, although not as rampant as in the eastern colonies, was still a problem (Paull, 2001). The Catholic system continued to receive funds from the government until 1856 when Governor Kennedy terminated state aid (Mossenson, 1972). At this time the enrolment in Catholic schools represented almost one-third of children in the colony, 279 children compared to 590 in the state school system (Mossenson, 1972). In 1855 four Sisters of the French Order of St Joseph of the Apparition arrived with Catholic Bishop Serra and took charge of the St Joseph’s girls’ school in Fremantle, while the Sisters of Mercy later opened new Catholic schools at Toodyay and York and also pioneered secondary education (Mossenson, 1972). The Catholic system continued to fund itself through fee-paying parents and parish support.

**Sectarianism**

In 1871 financial assistance for non-government schools in Western Australia was reinstated through Governor Weld ("Elementary Education Bill," 1871), and the Catholic and government schools continued to work and expand alongside each other. However, the Catholic Church throughout the world was by that time embattled by sectarianism and saw the world as hostile. The encyclical Quanta Cura, (Pope Pius IX, 1864), for instance, insisted that education could not be separate from religion. In 1879 this was reinforced and presented by the Bishops of Australia in stating that:

The Church condemns, with marked emphasis, those schools, and that method of teaching in which the religious element is divorced from the secular. …which leads to corruption of morals and loss of faith, to national effeminacy and to national dishonour (O'Farrell, 1969, p. 390).

The Bishops were very clear in stating that parents must “send their children, when fit of age, exclusively to Catholic schools” and that failure to follow this
obligation would place their children in “danger of perversion” and expose the parents to “serious guilt” (O’Farrell, 1969). Australia was not isolated in this division, as similar arguments abounded in the United Kingdom.

With benefit of hindsight the ending of state aid to non-denominational (sic) schools seems to have been both unjust and damaging to Australia’s social fabric. The church-state question was inherited from the United Kingdom and hardly a single argument was advanced in Australia which had not been aired earlier in British debates, yet in no part of the United Kingdom was so one-sided a settlement imposed as in each of the Australian colonies (Partington, 1997, p. 159).

Partington’s stance is supported by O’Farrell (1985, p. 138), who describes the sectarian disputes over education as being “the centre for what was probably the most passionate, fundamental and continuing ideological conflict in Australia’s history”.

As sectarianism continued in the Australian colonies, a growing public view insisting upon “secular, compulsory, and free education” (Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly, 1872) began to dominate the political scene and all funding for non-government schools was systematically withdrawn. Victoria was the first state to enact legislation (Parliament of Victoria, 1872), with Western Australia being the last colony to fall into line ("Assisted Schools Abolition Act, 1895," 1895). Despite the withdrawal of government funding in 1895 from all non-government schools, the student population in Catholic schools continued to grow rapidly with lay women predominantly staffing the parish primary schools, and with religious orders staffing the secondary schools and private schools that operated for profit. This was the case for the remainder of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth (Fogarty, 1959; Ryan, 2001). These schools were dependent on the parish communities for the funds needed to ensure that the schools could be staffed, resourced and maintained. Protestant communities, however, did not have the assistance of religious teaching orders and were not able to support their schools in the same way and resorted to charging high fees, which made them accessible to only the wealthier families (Potts, 1999b).

The Return of State Aid
In the 1960s, the developments in education, particularly science education, together with the declining availability of teachers from religious orders, placed the Catholic system in serious financial crisis (Hogan, 1978; O'Farrell, 1985, Tannock, 1979). Further developments, such as the post-war baby boom and the high rate of government-sponsored immigration, had a strong effect on Catholic schools as the Catholic families had a higher birth rate and the immigration brought large numbers of people from Southern Europe who were primarily Catholic (Hogan, 1978). A further change during this era was an increased climate of tolerance towards Catholics following the Second World War (Hogan, 1978). In March 1960, E.G. Whitlam, as the new Parliamentary Deputy Leader of the Opposition, suggested that a case for public funding for Catholic schools could be made on the basis of their poverty (Hogan, 1978, p. 15). Different forms of state aid began to be provided through scholarships from State governments and low interest capital loans from the federal government (Hogan, 1978) but it was still not sufficient. Influential lay
Catholics, advocating from organisations such as the Parents’ and Friends’ Federation of Western Australia, and in the Knights of the Southern Cross were instrumental in leading the campaign (Hogan, 1978, p. 49). In contrast to other states the effort was statewide and solid and in 1960 Premier Brand pressed the nation’s Prime Minister for more Commonwealth education funds on behalf of the non-State schools (Hogan, 1978, p. 63). “Western Australia was the first state to provide recurrent funding” (Angus, 2003, p. 117) from the Commonwealth Government.

Further pressure in New South Wales culminated in the Goulburn School Strike of 1962 (Cullinane, n.d.) and, by the time of the federal election one year later, it had become obvious that Catholic voters were swinging towards the Liberal party and away from their traditional Labor party allegiance. “The dogma of a century that state aid was political suicide has been completely overturned. The new dogma was that state aid was a vote-winner” (Hogan, 1978, p. 87). In 1963 there was a decision to grant direct Commonwealth aid to non-State schools and financial assistance to non-government schools has continued to increase into the twenty-first century. It is now an accepted “plank of platform of the major political parties at the federal level” (Louden & Browne, 1993, p. 116) and, as Anderson declares, "Politically no government, Labor or Conservative, state or federal, would dream of reducing state aid, let alone abolish it" (Anderson, 1993, p. 198).

Within the Western Australian historical context, educational choice has been available and contentious since the earliest days of European settlement. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries then, how can we further our understanding of school choice?

Research Method

The research described in this paper focussed on trying to answer the above question by developing a substantive theory that would explain and give meaning to the process through which the family moves when faced with the issue of school choice. This phenomenon of choice was examined through use of the grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin 1990, Glaser & Strauss 1967, Glaser 1978, 1992, 1998), a qualitative methodology, and an explanatory theory was developed that illuminated the bases for the complex choices that families make and the way in which they maintain, or change, those choices.

The grounded theory method, initially described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their seminal work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, consists of “systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analysing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data” (Charmaz 2000, p. 509). The resultant grounded theory is valuable to the extent that it adds a micro view of a particular human social process. Originally, Glaser and Strauss maintained that only professional sociologists were able to develop grounded theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, they later worked with researchers in other disciplines (Glaser, 1978) and the method has since been used in education, nursing, business, social work, architecture, communications, religious studies, occupational therapy, art, and sports psychology (Irurita, 1996; Strauss &
Corbin, 1997), extending far beyond the purely sociological field (Piantanida, Tananis & Grubs, 2002). The theory relating to parents’ choice of schooling that is described in this paper does not presume to be a contribution to educational sociology, but seeks rather to develop a substantive grounded theory generated by a practitioner-researcher that is useful for the consideration of issues related to school choice (Piantanida et al., 2002).

**Use of literature in the Grounded Theory Method**

In deductive research the available literature is typically reviewed early in the research process in order that an understanding of the topic is acquired early, the extent of previous work is acknowledged and analysed, and any unresolved issues are revealed (Hart, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). When used in qualitative research, the intentionally inductive nature of the grounded theory method requires that the literature be reviewed only after the emerging theory has been sufficiently grounded in the data, and then principally to relate the theory to the existing literature through the integration of ideas (Glaser, 1978). As Punch (1998, p. 167) states,

> Grounded theory has a different perspective on this matter from other research approaches. The difference lies in how the literature is dealt with, and when it is introduced, and follows from the stress that grounded theory places on theory generation.

Strauss and Corbin (1992), as well as Glaser (1978), give a further caution about the use of literature. It is important, they argue, not to “contaminate one’s efforts to generate concepts from the data with preconceived concepts that may not really fit, work or be relevant” (Glaser, 1978, p. 31) and to avoid being “constrained by having to adhere to a previously developed theory that may or may not apply to the area under investigation” (Strauss & Corbin, 1992, p. 49). This procedure was followed in the research presented in this paper but following the establishment of the theory, a search was undertaken to examine all available research into the issue of choice of schooling and a list of this research is presented in Appendix A.

**Constant Comparative Analysis**

The strategic method used to generate a grounded theory is constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Hutchinson, 1986, Corbin 1986). Constant comparative analysis proceeds through four stages: comparing incident to incident to form categories, integrating the categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The strategic aim of the analysis is to “generate theoretical constructs that, along with substantive codes and categories and their properties, form a theory that encompasses as much behavioural variation as possible” (Hutchinson, 1986, p. 122). While there are many other complexities in the grounded theory method only this principle means of analysis will be described.

Some actual data from the present study will be used here illustrate constant comparative analysis. For example, one of the participants in this study, an immigrant, described his appreciation of the kind of home country education he had had that later became unavailable to other coloured people during the
apartheid period. He recounted a strong appreciation of what his parents had done for him, particularly by taking him each day to the city to attend the same school where his father had been educated. His education, he declared, was as good as any available at that time. He was very appreciative also of the choices that his parents had made and the sacrifice that those choices had entailed. Another participant, who had also been born and educated overseas, spoke of her education and the choices that her parents made for her. She was among the first generation of girls that were given equal access to education, even to the extent that she was the only girl in her class in her initial secondary school experience. After completing her schooling her parents allowed and encouraged her to travel overseas to gain further education and to seek professional employment.

The accounts related by these two participants are different in that the second one recounted an experience that was in the forefront of the change that ensured proper advantage for girls in education in her country, while the first was at the end of equal educational opportunity immediately before the apartheid regime was established. Yet they both embody and convey a similar sense of appreciation as they explored the meaning of their personal experience in relation to educational possibilities for past or future generations. The second had reached a time of independence unknown to previous generations of women in her country and the first had achieved an education that was denied to the following generations of his race, which in turn deprived the children of opportunity. Comparative analysis of both accounts helped the researcher to develop and name a category of “Personal History”, a category which later became important in the “refining of family imperatives” that emerged as a key procedural element in the first iteration of the theory.

The general process through which the analyst moves from raw data to the eventual integrated theory can be schematised as shown in Figure 1. Even though the figure seems to imply a hierarchical development, there is much activity that is concurrent and circular. It has been presented in a hierarchical manner only to convey the progressive growth character of grounded theory development. This schematic construction of the process was developed early in the research plan to provide a deeper understanding of the way in which grounded theory uses comparative data analysis and theoretically sensitive methods to eventually produce a theory that is fully grounded in the data. To aid the cohesiveness of the diagram it is presented on the following page.
Figure 1  Construction of a grounded theory

GROUNDED THEORY CONSTRUCTED

Theoretical construct of core category and linking categories schematically presented

Pool of data used to provide every possible variation in describing the categories

Concepts abstracted into categories

Similar ideas grouped into concepts by constantly comparing incident to incident

Data fractured in open coding process
Each piece of data named

Pool of data from participant interviews and other sources
Concern Shared by Families

The study described in this paper discovered three particular conditions that caused families to move into being challenged to choose. Conditions exist within Western Australia in a context where government policy both locally and in the international arena is increasing school choices. School choice is not just increasing within the non-government sector where government has made increased funding available, but is available within the government sector as well. Choice and market competition seem to be well established within the education sector (Ladd, 2003). The “most compelling justification for giving parents more choice over the schools their children attend is to force schools to compete for students and thereby to improve the quality of education they offer” (Ladd, p. 5). This closely links the concepts of parental choice, self-governing school and competition and is based on market models.

Figure 2 portrays diagrammatically the various categories and properties of the parents’ shared concern of being challenged to choose. The three main categories within the causal concern are the specific needs of the child, availability of schooling and family imperatives.

*Figure 2 Being challenged to choose*

![Diagram of Being Challenged to Choose]

Family Imperatives
While a number of reports list religion as being an important aspect of choice (Anderson, 1990, 1993; Flynn, 1993a, 1993b, 2000; Sensis, 2004), this original study found that while it was certainly one of the imperatives that drove the family to choose non-government schooling, it was not the sole focus of the imperatives. There are other aspects that are of importance to the family’s identity and they are divided into religious based and non-religious based imperatives. The religious based values focus on a culture of faith, religious commitment and support of family values. Where families desired a culture of faith in the school they looked for a variety of aspects of school life experience. They would seek external signs within the school such as religious artefacts and
the presence of a priest, but they would also look for specific religious
behaviours within the school. For some families their own religious
commitment meant that they were so immersed in religious connectedness that it
would be very hard for them to seek schooling for their children outside of the
religious context. Family values such as social justice, equality and respect
were important and the enunciation of these values made it possible for
participants to engage in dialectic that assisted them to make meaning from their
experience of choice.

Non-religious based imperatives included developing independence, education
for life long learning, and proximity to good schooling. Parents specifically
looked for school choices that would continue their parenting focus of
developing independence. This could be either independence in terms of living
skills or independence as a prime value that encouraged critical thinking about
the world that we live in.

Where parents had a focus on life long learning, they sought school choices that
promoted such learning and not simply a place where each numbered student
has to proceed. To engage in ideas of life long learning, the parents typically
had a wider view of their children’s capacity that they could not see being
sufficiently nurtured and fulfilled by the government schooling that was
available to them. It also linked to their sense of self and the continuing desire
for learning that focussed on their own particular giftedness.

Proximity to good schooling was an important consideration for many families.
It was not only attached to a geographical location and the aspects such as
safety, economy and travel that are important in school choice, but it also
included aspects of their family history and experience of their own schooling.
For those for whom it was possible, moving house to actually be close to their
idea of a good school was a preferred reality. This has been reflected in the data

Availability of Schooling
Data analysis indicated that the property, availability of schooling, had two
distinguishable dimensions: country issues and city issues. The former had
major ramifications for the families involved, as resolution of the challenges
presented by living remote from the capital, or large country town, typically
required the children to be educated away from their home. Many country
families found it difficult to access their most preferred schooling options,
particularly if their financial circumstances presented severe limitations, a
common experience in the prevailing rural decline. In some instances, costs
needed to be built into the family budget many years before school choices had
to be made.

Availability issues also presented challenges for some city families, particularly
where there had been school consolidation and relocations within the
government school sector as a consequence of changing demography and
enrolment demands.
Specific Needs of the Child
Learning difficulties encompass a wide range of experiences for families. It had been suggested by Anderson (1993, p. 198) that, despite the general drift of enrolments to the non-government school sector, many children with learning difficulties would not enjoy the same access to choice and remain by default in the government system as "children with handicaps and children of the poor." However, the present study has shown that this need not be the case. In reality, it is often the schools in the non-government sector that have excellence in care and support for those with learning difficulties, as a commitment to children disadvantaged by circumstance is frequently an explicit part of the school's social mission. And for the Catholic schools in particular, the recent introduction of direct financial support for low income families through the Catholic school system's Health Care Card access policy, has ensured that school choice in the lower socio-economic areas is now a reality for many low-income families.

Participants in this study carefully considered the emotional needs of their children and evidenced an awareness of the vulnerabilities they felt could result in damage were the child to be limited only to the available government schools. Whether there is in fact less emotional care for at-risk students within the government school sector was not ascertained in the present study as that was beyond the scope of the investigation, but it is clear that many parents of children with learning or emotional difficulties had concerns about the children's prospects within the mainstream government school sector.

For some children, their sporting prowess opened access opportunities at private schools where they would otherwise not have been eligible for entry. Parents showed concern where a child had a particularly high level of sporting skill that they wanted to nurture for them and were thus drawn to choose a school that would nurture the talent in a particular way. With sporting heroes enjoying high regard within the Australian community, an opportunity to maximise fulfillment of a child's sporting potential can offer social mobility as well as a significant financial rewards.

Parents of children with particular giftedness in areas such as music, art, dance, drama or languages were typically keen to have these talents developed to a level of excellence. Although scholarships are available within the government school sector to allow talented children, regardless of where they live, to enter designated schools that specialise in one or more areas of giftedness, parents unable to take advantage of them were often challenged to choose from the non-government sector.

Awareness of a child's special academic abilities or interests also challenged some parents to consider options outside the government school sector. Where there was a perception that the local government school did not have the resources or reputation for academic excellence, parents were often challenged to choose from the non-government school sector, sometimes on those grounds alone.
Any of the above considerations was often sufficient to create for the families concerned a situation of being challenged to choose. Having faced that reality, families typically then set about consciously and deliberately to arrive at a choice of school that would be consistent with the family's imperatives and aspirations and, hopefully, deliver satisfaction in the short and longer term.

Discovering and documenting the basic social process in which the families engaged as they endeavoured to achieve this became the focal objective and core category of the study. At its heart was the inherent drive that most families experienced towards realising as fully as possible their family's potential. It was this drive towards realising family potential that constituted the basic social process and core category of the study's discovered grounded theory.

Realising Family Potential

The basic social process and core category of realising family potential through decisions regarding school choice was found to consist of two sequentially related phases: making the choice and managing the choice. Each of these phases included within it a number of stages for the family to move through as they prepare for and eventually progress to making and sustaining their choice. The basic social process of realising family potential is first engaged when the family finds that it is being challenged to choose something other than what is immediately accessible within the available local government school. While this may result in the parents choosing a school outside the government sector altogether, it might alternatively result in finding a way for the child to enter a different school in the government sector. Regardless of the eventual destination, the common feature is the driving desire by the parents to ensure that their child is able to access a school environment that best matches the family's imperatives and the parents' aspirations for the child and family.

Figure 3  Core category of realising family potential
Figure 3 depicts the basic social process of realising family potential in terms of its two component phases of making and managing the choice of school, and the particular named stages within each phase.

The basic social process modelled by the theory moves first through an initial phase that leads through three linked stages to the point at which the choice is made, and then through a subsequent two-stage phase of managing the choice, the result of which may be either to maintain the original choice if any attendant issues can be resolved, or to change the choice where the issues cannot be resolved satisfactorily within the current school. As the diagram suggests, if the decision resulting from Phase Two is to change the child’s enrolment, the parents are effectively re-entering the process afresh with a second pass through Phase One of the model. The essential features of two phases of the process are discussed separately in the following sections.

**Phase One: Making the Choice**

The first stage within Phase One has been identified from the interview data as a sub-process of refining family imperatives, a process that involves rumbling and refining. Figure 4 depicts this process with the intervening conditions that affect the movement of the family through this stage of refining family imperatives. While the rumbling and refining is in progress, the child’s needs, attitudes of others around them, the needs and influence of their wider family, and their own personal history can affect the way in which the family’s imperatives are refined.

*Figure 4. Stage One – Refining family imperatives, with intervening conditions*
As depicted in Figure 5, this second stage of Phase One requires that the parents consider a variety of influences during sourcing information that will help them to define and delimit the viable options. While sourcing the information, critical family events, external factors, the family’s geographical location, the accessibility of schools, as well as their own resources will all be influential in how they move towards their options being framed.

**Figure 5  Stage Two – Framing their options, with intervening conditions**

If the frame generated from the sourcing and evaluating activities in Stage Two includes more than one school, the family typically then engage in a balancing action where the relative merits of the framed options are compared and weighed against the outcomes the parents are seeking. Factors that can intervene to shape and direct this part of the basic social process include the time available to reach a decision, external considerations that affect whether a decision is required sooner rather than later, attitudes and opinions expressed by influential others, and particular family needs at the time. Once the most appropriate match has been found between what the parents want and what a particular option appears to offer, a choice of preferred school can be confirmed, an outcome that represents successful conclusion of Phase One of realising family potential and is represented in Figure 6.

**Figure 6.  Stage Three – Making a match, with intervening conditions**
Had there been just one school remaining within the frame of viable options at the end of Stage Two of Phase One, the balancing action that would otherwise be a feature of Stage Three would not be required and making the choice would be essentially an automatic outcome, in which case Phase One would conclude at that point.

**Phase Two: Managing the Choice**

The need for conceptualising a second phase within the basic social process of realising family potential was an unexpected development in the study as none of the initial research objectives had envisaged anything other than discovering what was involved in reaching the point at which a decision is first made for the choice of school for the child. It soon became obvious, however, that it was not possible to leave the explication of the process only at the point of first making a choice. Parents, and the children concerned, typically continue over time to review and justify in an ongoing way the choice they have made and changes are usually made if it becomes evident for some reason that maintaining the current enrolment can no longer be justified in light of the family’s imperatives and aspirations. Many intervening conditions can impinge upon the original choice and necessitate or precipitate a review. As can be seen in Figure 7, new opportunities, obstacles and critical family events can intervene in various forms to require a reconsideration of the extent to which the existing arrangements are now continuing to fulfil expectations for the family or the child.

**Figure 7. Intervening conditions within Stage One in Phase Two**

If, in the family’s assessment, the initial choice has been and remains efficacious, the child’s enrolment in the school can be maintained as it is seen to be continuing to satisfy what the family wants, their availability issues and the needs of the child. But where the original choice is considered no longer to be efficacious, the family will typically look for ways to rectify the situation. If the perceived shortcomings cannot be rectified by achieving some meaningful adjustment within the current school, or by engaging new resources that can
compensate for what is missing, the decision may be taken to remove the child from the school in order to provide a better match elsewhere. In most cases this will involve enrolling the child in another school, but in some cases, may include a decision to educate the child at home.

As was noted earlier, if the situation develops to the point that the parents choose to remove the child, they are in effect beginning afresh the process of choosing a suitable school. To that extent, it can be seen that the family are at this point re-engaging the first process, namely, making a choice. In this sense, the basic social process is potentially cyclic. However, the more important point is that the data shows that the process, especially within the phase of managing the choice, is a living and dynamic process, reflecting the evolving perceptions and personal logic underlying the ongoing decision making of parents as they seek continuously to optimise the realisation of their family potential. The essential elements of the overall theory are depicted together in Figure 8 at the conclusion of this paper.

The complete theory developed from the data includes both the discovered social process that is directed towards the realisation of family potential, and the underlying causal concern of being challenged to choose that provides the stimulus and necessity for engaging in the quest for realising family potential in the first place. These two, taken together, fulfil the essential requirements for the kind of grounded theory that the study sought to discover from the testimonies of the participants who shared their recollections of how they experienced the process of making decisions about the choice of schooling for their children where the choice included opportunities to move outside the mainstream government school that was available.
Conclusion

This paper has presented the grounded theory discovered from data and includes a basic social problem, being challenged to choose, and a core category, realising family potential, that is the basic social process in which families engage to make choices about schooling for their children. The historical context of educational choice within Western Australia has been described as well as a brief overview of the process of theory generation using the grounded theory method. Despite a considerable search of available literature (Appendix A), no other substantive grounded theory dealing with the phenomenon of school choice was found.

Figure 8  Grounded Theory of Realising Family Potential
Reference list

Elementary Education Bill, Parliament of Western Australia (1871).
Assisted Schools Abolition Act, 1895, Parliament of Western Australia, 12 October Sess (1895).


## Appendix A:

### Choice of Schooling Research in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph H. Fichter</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Parochial school: A sociological study</td>
<td>Quantitative study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Praetz</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Where shall we send them?</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Praetz</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Public policy and Catholic schools</td>
<td>Historical analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT Schools Authority</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Choice of School in the ACT Parents Have Their Say</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoffery Partington</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Why parents are choosing independent schools</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Carpenter and John Western</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Choosing non-government secondary schooling</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcellin Flynn</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>The culture of Catholic schools</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelvin Canavan</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Why do parents choose a Catholic school?</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Weston</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Quality of school life in government, Catholic and other private secondary schools</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irving Saulwick and Denis Muller for Association of Independent Schools of Victoria</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>What parents want from their children's education in independent schools</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelvin Canavan</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>What parents expect of Catholic schools</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc. of Independent Schools of Qld</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1999 parent survey: Why parents choose independent schools</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Cuttance and Shirley A. Stokes</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Reporting on student and school achievement</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Sultmann</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Future Catholic school research project</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Education Office Toowoomba Diocese</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Examination of parent preference for schooling</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geri O'Keefe</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Family Faith and Life Survey</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire Aitchison</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Mothers and School Choice – Managing Risk</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education, Science and Training</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Parents’ and community members’ attitudes to schooling</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian Beavis and Australian Council for Educational Research</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Why parents choose private or public schools</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Kelley and MDR Evans</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Choice between government, Catholic, and independent schools: culture and community, rather than class</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyndal Wilson - Independent Schools Council of Australia</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>School choice in Australia: research overview</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Ryan and Louise Watson</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>The drift to private school in Australia: Understanding its features</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensis®</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Sensis® Consumer Report</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>