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A grounded theory: Realising family potential through choice of schooling

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CHAPTER 3

BASIC SOCIAL CONCERN: BEING CHALLENGED TO CHOOSE

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Grounded theory accounts for social action in a substantive area (Glaser, 1998, p. 115). In this study the families involved in the action of choosing secondary schooling were motivated by a prime concern. Their attempt at resolving this concern is the core variable and the continual process in which the participants engaged is the focus of this grounded theory (Glaser, p. 116).

This chapter defines the basic social concern, which has been named *being challenged to choose*. This major category emerged from the data as each participant showed that a serious challenge they faced in rearing their children was to provide education within the limits of their resources and circumstances, yet taking into account the needs of their whole family. This chapter deals with the causal conditions that resulted in the families being challenged to choose.

The participants in the study were all involved in a common circumstance, that is, of choosing education for their children. Even though education is a focus for all parents in Australia because it is compulsory for children to attend school until 15 years of age (School Education Act, 1999), there are causal conditions that give rise to the phenomenon where parents are challenged to choose outside of the education provided at the local government school. The parents who participated in this study shared meanings and behaviours that constituted the substance of the theory, but, as is assumed by grounded theorists, the shared specific social psychological problem was not necessarily articulated (Hutchinson, 1986, p. 114). As the participants spoke of what they were doing

in the education of their children early in the data collection, a process of decision-making began to emerge. However, in order to reach a conceptual understanding of their basic social concern a much higher level of inference was required in the conceptualisation of the data. This has resulted in an understanding of the shared concerns and meanings of the participant group.

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

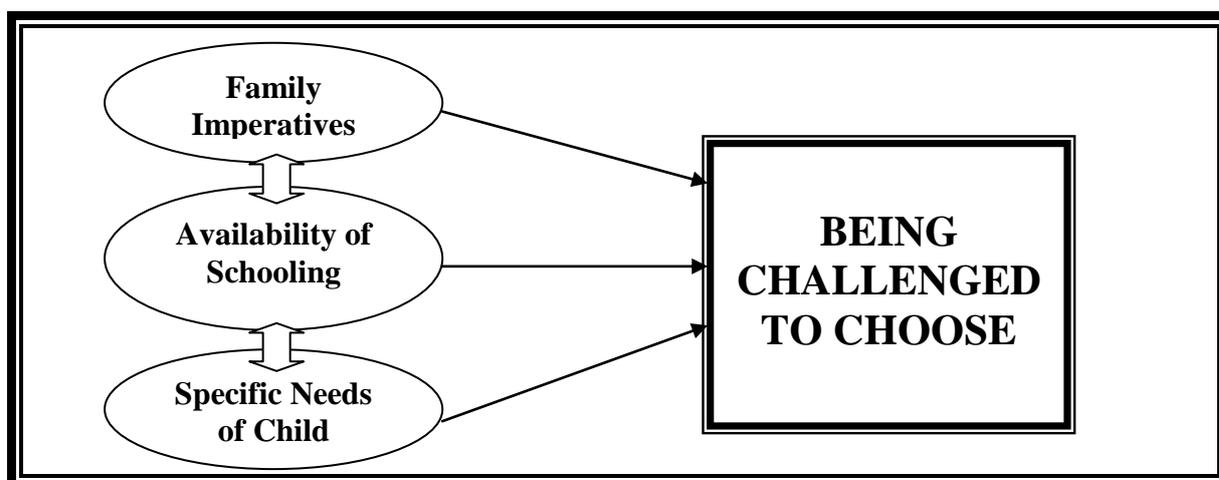
Causal Conditions of *Being Challenged to Choose*

The personal meanings expressed in the participants' decision making cannot be understood in isolation, and need to be interpreted in context. In each case, there are situational conditions or circumstances that caused the parents to be challenged to choose outside the local government schools. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 100) define as causal conditions, those "events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon". The causal conditions that are described in this chapter directly lead the parents into *being challenged to choose*. Where these conditions do not occur, parents face no challenge to choose different schooling because the local government school education that

is provided satisfactorily fulfils their needs. The choice of government schooling is not to be seen, however, as purely a default action, as many families actively chose their local government schooling in preference to the other options.

From the data obtained through interviewing the study participants, it became clear that there were three major reasons why parents choose schools outside the government sector. They have been named: *family imperatives*, *availability of schooling*, and *specific needs of the child*. In the language of grounded theory, these are interpreted as being ‘properties’ of the core concern. Each of these properties is dimensionalised, which in effect, gives the dimension over which a category might vary (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 70). For example, *family imperatives* can range over a continuum from relatively minor family aspirations that will influence a schooling decision in the initial process, to intense levels of commitment to ideals that they see as non-negotiable. Figure 3.1 represents diagrammatically how these three properties exist in causal relationship to the basic social concern, *being challenged to choose*. Any or all of these causal influences may be operative in a particular case, though the relative strengths or significance of the individual causes will vary from case to case.

Figure 3.1. Three properties of the Basic Social Concern of Being Challenged to Choose

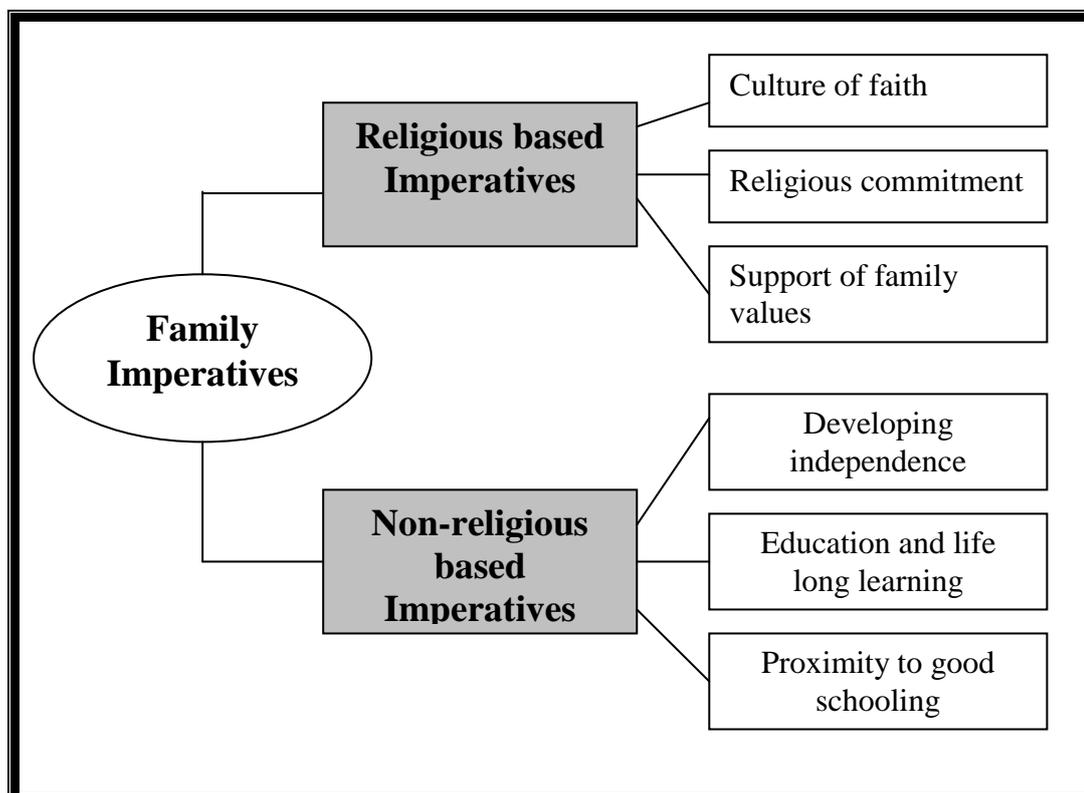


Family Imperatives

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

The range of imperatives that drives families into being challenged to choose, and therefore becoming engaged in a process that could lead to enrolment of their children in non-government education, is dimensionalised by the level of engagement. Such engagement is indicated by the intensity of the family's imperative and of their active participation in the issues that emerge from the need for education of their children. Figure 3.2 shows how the property *family imperatives* was itself dimensionalised based on interpretation of the interview data.

Figure 3.2. Sub-category – Family imperatives



Religious Based Imperatives

Religious based imperatives identified in the data included issues revolving around a culture of faith, religious commitment and support of family values.

Religious based imperatives: Culture of faith.

Even before children are born, some families have made educational decisions and presumptions. Samantha and Greg who participated in this study had cause to repeatedly move around Australia due to Greg's employment commitments. Samantha and Greg had each completed their own schooling within the Catholic system:

I suppose my dream is that because [my husband] and I went to Catholic schools all our lives, we just presumed we'd do the same with our children (Samantha, p. 3).

Samantha and Greg's desire for their children to be surrounded by a culture of faith, as they themselves had been, formed their initial imperative for educational choice but this was challenged by their employment mobility and their access to Catholic schooling. On arriving in Western Australia, in contrast to their experience in other states, long waiting lists meant that their ready access to Catholic primary schooling was essentially impossible. Interstate arrivals often have no alternative but to enrol in government schools. The distress felt by Samantha and Greg was increased by the attitude, similarly experienced by other interstate families, of the school's administrative staff who seemed less than welcoming. Pressure on some Catholic schools who have excessive waiting lists has meant that there is no allowance made for interstate people who then have no alternative but to use government schools. In her narrative Samantha described her feelings:

Shocking - absolutely shocking. In fact, when the lady at [the Catholic primary school] spoke to me quite nastily, just before Christmas, I went home to Greg and said, "There's no room at the inn." (Samantha, p. 1).

Oh, look, if I could have my way, I would like to get them into a Catholic school if we possibly could. Somewhere along the line, a miracle might happen. I would still like to do that - not for the education but hopefully for their religious education which is so important. I'm not a

religious freak by any means. I'm not anything like that but I just think there's something that's going to give them the background that I really believe in. I'd like them to get that. But whether our situation really does that, I don't know. I think now, at least I'm thinking more realistically that it may not happen and we're going to have to find something else. I don't know whether there will be youth groups that they can join in the parish. I don't know, but hopefully there'll be something (Samantha, p. 7).

Another family, where both parents were from Catholic families and had themselves received a full Catholic education, spoke of the culture of their Catholicism.

There's got to be reason for me sending my kids to the Catholic school, and it's not that I think there's a better class of people there or, not even that there's better discipline at a Catholic school 'cause there's some very good government schools around. It really comes down to that culture of um, supporting your values, not just um you know in terms of um the commandments as such but, the whole thing of the social conscience, that we have a responsibility and I think that's there (Julie, p. 2).

Having themselves being formed within the Catholic culture, Julie and her husband are drawn to continue the same within their own family.

The reverse, however, can also be true. One family, who had migrated to Australia because of the husband's employment, came from an enculturation in faith quite different from what is typical within the Australian experience. Damien had no Catholic schooling at all, while his wife, Rachel, had had only some in primary and a little in secondary. In their country of origin it was only seldom possible to access Catholic schools. Their faith had therefore been nurtured essentially within the family and the parish. As a result, Damien and Rachel saw no necessity at all for Catholic schooling. Rachel and Damien were *being challenged to choose* because of their strong desire to maintain their Catholic culture, but this was not, for them, dependent on Catholic education. Talking to work colleagues confronted them with aspects of education in

Catholic schools that seemed to them to threaten their family culture of faith, and they chose to use the government system of education instead.

It comes from a number of people we know through work and through socialising that have sent their children to Catholic schools and they're not remotely interested in Catholicism at all ... So whilst on one hand I initially thought it was a good option, I began to think, "Why are people in Western Australia sending their kids to Catholic schools?" I changed my thinking about it a bit in the sense that I'm seeing a lot of people sending their kids there because they think that's the best thing to do. "It's the best thing to do." Well, yes, it may be, but you're not a very devout Catholic and if the idea of me sending my child to a Catholic school is to get a Catholic education, then I don't know if I necessarily want my child rubbing elbows with your child, because your child is coming to school here, but he's hearing from you that Catholicism is not something that you endeavour to practice, it's something that you're just buying, like you buy an education off the shelf. So it's really discrediting it (Rachel, p. 5).

Damien and Rachel's eldest son was, at the time they were interviewed for the study, attending the local government high school because they felt that their son's faith development would be under threat if he were to be schooled in a presumably Catholic environment but surrounded by those whom, they had been told, were actively discouraging faith expression. Rachel and Damien were, however, having different thoughts about their second son because Rachel was very keen to encourage him to the priesthood and so felt that there was a greater need on his part to be given the opportunity for a fuller immersion in Catholic culture.

I think the next couple of years will probably be pivotal for [him] because he's eight now and -- I think assessing the needs is important. Because we don't embrace this notion that Catholic schools give the children that Catholic culture, that's less of an issue than -- I think there are a lot of people who say, "Yes, we embrace the Catholic culture" but they still don't rock up on Sunday. I think some of them are being quite hypocritical when they say that. I think we'll have to assess [his] needs, assess what we feel [the Catholic boys' school] can give him. I would have said if [he] is leaning towards the priesthood, yes we will definitely go towards [the

Catholic boys' school] - because I know then that he will get more focus towards that sort of thing than he will get if he goes to another school (Rachel, p. 14).

Another participant, Jane, described it as her passion to provide a firm foundation in faith while the boys were in their school years.

In the secondary area, it's just a passion of mine that hopefully we can provide this for the boys so that perhaps they can develop that stage [of their faith] further (Jane, p. 6).

Jane modelled her faith life on that of her grandmother. Witnessing her grandmother's regular trek up the hill to the church had been a beacon in Jane's early years and very important in the development of her religious values.

I had a very devout Catholic grandmother who I absolutely adored - beautiful lady. She was strong. Everything went wrong in her family. You think, but through it, all I can see is her going up and down this hill every Sunday. She took every opportunity she had to go to church. I guess that's the influence, that's the role model that I look at ... I looked at her as a role model. She was such a wise lady, such a strong lady. That's the only thing I can pinpoint that helped her get through all the things she got through - and my grandfather too. My grandfather was a very devout Catholic man ... (Jane, p. 6).

Despite the fact that her husband did not share her faith, Jane was able to persist in her own faith development and has found important expression of it through being able to support friends in their times of distress.

I'm not very well educated in it but it doesn't matter to me. It's a very deep faith, something I truly believe in. I have friends who have faith but have no religion who rely on me when their mothers pass away or their marriages split up or whatever. I find they turn to me because they're looking for something else, they're looking for something they have no connection with. I don't say, "Oh you must come to mass with me and pray with me. I will pray for you." It's just something that they think, "[Jane] might understand this and might understand why I'm feeling this way." They think I understand things in a larger sense, I think. I try not to look at -- I just try to help them through it (Jane, p. 17).

Jane's strong personal faith commitment and appreciation formed an initial imperative that caused her to engage the *challenge to choose*. Although she would have preferred to have enrolled her children in Catholic primary schools where the faith component would reinforce what she was trying to inculcate at home, the high cost of the fees presented an obstacle for the family at the time. Reluctantly, she enrolled her children in the local government school. As a counterbalance, she elected to work only part-time in order that she could have maximum personal availability for her children outside school hours, hoping that this could compensate for the fact that they would not be receiving a Catholic primary education. Although she had agonised over the decision at the time, she was comfortable with the decision she had reached.

This level of faith commitment and appreciation formed the imperative for Jane to enter the challenge of choosing and accessing schooling that would reinforce what she is trying to achieve within her family domain. Decisions about primary schooling presented a challenge since Jane's family lived in a new area with no easy access to a Catholic primary school. Jane made a decision, with which she was well satisfied, to send her children to the local government primary school. She made a decision to work part time so that she could have the maximum personal availability for her children but at a cost of not having a Catholic primary education.

I felt that in order to send him to primary Catholic school, I would have to work full-time to afford the fees. I had to weigh it up. "Is my influence going to be better to work part-time and be with them more than a Catholic education for primary?" I determined in my own mind that I needed to be here in the younger years, and when they're taking these outside influences later is when they need it reinforcing at school, in the environment that he's in during the day. That's the way we've looked at it (Jane, p. 2).

Secondary schooling offered a different challenge for Jane.

In the secondary area, he needs to go to a Catholic school. He's obviously starting adolescence. I had a different sort of adolescence to that which I hope he experiences, in the fact that my family split. So lots of things didn't get continued, including my Catholic

education. I find now that they're grasping influences from a wider range as they're getting older. I feel that he needs that reinforcement now of the faith and that needs developing. He's not necessarily going to be listening to his parents, so to speak. It was a financial decision not to send them to primary Catholic school but, even though that financial aspect is probably still there, the importance is now greater (Jane, p. 2).

Choosing government primary and then Catholic secondary was the experience for a number of families. The close proximity of the government primary school, along with the needs of other very young children, motivated the initial decision reached by Belinda and her family. However, a new imperative changed the direction of her thinking once the difficulty of small babies had been left behind and she was becoming aware of what her children were missing by being apart from the other Catholic children in her parish.

I think just because I always went to a Catholic primary school and Catholic high school and I just didn't feel ... We were going to church on Sundays and I didn't feel they were part of that community. The children from Catholic schools would be called up to do something and mine were like left out. There was Sunday school for those who didn't go to Catholic schools. I just felt ... The kids didn't feel it, I don't think, but I did. I didn't feel part of the community because they weren't at the Catholic school (Belinda, p. 2).

Sally's family, who also chose government primary and then Catholic secondary schooling, experienced a similar situation. Sally was highly engaged in her children's religious education through an out-of-school program called the Parish Religious Education Program that is run through the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth. However, by the time her children had reached the end of their primary schooling she was concerned there would be nothing further for them in the parish program. She felt the time had come to switch to a Catholic school for their secondary years. Even though she felt that she was 'copping out' of their religious education by sharing the responsibility with a Catholic school, she was very aware that as adolescents they would need Catholic enculturation outside the home as well.

I think I'll cop out and send them to a secondary Catholic school. That's what I think I'm going to be doing (Sally, p. 16).

While Sally's reference to 'copping out' seems on the face of it to be somewhat dismissive of the importance of continuing with formal faith education, her engagement level was extremely high, as she sought information from many schools to ensure that the Catholicity of her children was supported to the highest possible extent through their future secondary schooling.

Another family, in this case from a remote rural area, were challenged on two fronts. Their remote location meant that secondary schooling of either form was not easily accessible, and their Catholic background and personal values provided the imperative that determined their eventual choice. Even though their farm had to provide for three families, including the retired parents, the continuing education of their children was a key priority.

My husband and I are on a farm with our brother-in-law. It's still a family farm and we still support my husband's parents, who live in [retirement] as well. We are wanting, quite a few of us - the three of us who work on the farm. But it is something that has always been done in the family: No matter what else, you educate your kids properly. That's a decision that we've made (Tracey, p. 19).

Their faith imperative was such that giving their children a 'proper' education meant doing whatever was necessary to ensure that their secondary education would be in a Catholic school.

...when you're in this isolated area they basically know from day one that that's what's going to happen; they're going to go away and there is absolutely no other choice. They could go to [two other country towns] but you want the best opportunities for your children. Specifically, I really wanted my children to have a decent Catholic education that they just don't get out here (Tracey, p. 14).

Religious based imperatives: Religious commitment.

Although, at the time of being interviewed, Tricia was not yet at the stage of committing to an enrolment in secondary schooling, she showed deep concern

for the spiritual well being of her children. Having had great difficulties in her early life she had found solace in faith and converted to Catholicism and married into a Catholic family. Even though Tricia's husband does not regularly practise his faith he supports her efforts and her need for religious expression. Tricia's overriding concern was that she wanted religious education for her children in secondary school. This imperative derives from her personal conviction that a well-nurtured faith is life supporting.

... I think they still need it in high school because there are a lot of children out there who are having difficulties. I think religion is a good way to help them get through difficult times. ... There were times when I found religion to be a great asset (Tricia, p. 13).

Religious expression and commitment were synonymous for Tom and Beth in their supporting of family values. Tom's father had very strictly controlled Tom's religious upbringing and, having appreciated its value as he matured, Tom wanted his own children to have a similar experience.

If I wasn't to go to church or anything the kids wouldn't have a clue. They don't know that part of it. So, Dad did it to us, I hated it but, ya can see where I'm back again (Tom, p. 18).

This focus had also driven Tom to ensure that the children would receive as much Catholic education as was possible within the limitations of the family's means and country domicile.

The bottom line, I just like the convent, I like them to get taught some religion and hopefully more there than you'd get anywhere else ... That's what I hopefully want for the kids, some religious instruction, good teaching, that's it. ...And the values that goes with it which are great. Because I think even there are more non-Catholics up at the convent than there are Catholics but they get taught just like a Catholic and I think it also teaches them a few values that they don't have anywhere else (Tom, p. 28-29).

Religious based imperatives: Support of family values.

Mary and Gerard considered that bringing their children up within a Catholic background would be central to bringing about the desired inculcation of values.

I suppose partly because Gerard had had that background that he'd ... and I'd become a Catholic as an adult, and I thought that um hopefully if we sent them to a Catholic school they would receive the sort of values, or the reinforcement of the values that we'd given them at home, um I hope that would be the case (Mary, p. 4).

Since Mary and Gerard had begun their early family life by working overseas for five years, they were concerned initially that their children might be at risk of discrimination in school due to their somewhat different outlook and wider experiences. They were satisfied however, that the Catholic system, in the most part, had supported their values.

So we've appreciated the good in the Catholic system ... There's definitely been good in it, and the good has been in the reinforcing of the values that we've been trying to bring them through with and where those values have been reinforced it's been good (Mary, p. 19).

Albert described his ideal of a good education as one that aligned the values of the school and the family.

...there's two elements to it, the good upbringing and then a good education. The two, you know the two have to co-exist. You can't give them a good upbringing at home and then send them to a school where they won't get a good, where they won't carry on that role that you are portraying at home.

[I'm looking for] the things to do with our faith, that they are taught to respect one another, respect teachers, respect the school, you know, respect your uniform, and so on and so on (Albert, p. 3).

Albert's family had emigrated from a difficult political and racial environment and showed a high level of engagement in their faith through their relationships and commitment, evidenced also by an array of pious objects in the home that reflected the strength of their religiosity.

Non-Religious Based Imperatives

Non-religious based imperatives revealed by the interview data included a desire to develop independence within the children, a commitment to education as preparation for life long learning, and the importance of proximity and good schooling.

Non-religious based imperatives: Developing independence.

Participants from rural areas faced a variety of special problems and opportunities, and the way in which they fulfilled the needs driven by their imperatives was, for the most part, different in style from that of their city counterparts. Garry, for instance, concluded that the most important issue for his children was the need to achieve a level of independence after the comfort and easy familiarity of a country town. The goal of university and independent life in the city, away from the family and farm, as well as the difficulties associated with a country domicile, drove his engagement level in the issues of choice.

I think, it's always in the back of my mind, it's always been that, if they're going to go to university they've gotta go somewhere else, if they're going to go to TAFE they've got to go somewhere else. It was always the life skills that were important, they needed to become independent ... I think that I was always conscious of the fact that it was a very comfortable situation [at school in a country town] (Garry, p. 10).

There was going to be no independence taught to them. You know, it was probably, it was totally from their perspective ... it was just totally from the kids' point of view (Garry, p. 12).

Garry felt that the greatest need that his daughters faced was to be in a safe and secure environment in which to grow in independence, and this caused him to be challenged to choose a suitable school. He looked to Catholic boarding schools to provide that security.

That was sort of the focus and I think ... from there 11 and 12 we... you know, we wanted something that would give them some independence but still sort of, nurture that sort of caring (Garry, p. 23).

Many friends from Garry's country town had made similar choices and so he was familiar with the benefits, as were his daughters, although he and his family had had very little contact with Catholicism at the time of interview.

[Our friend's] twins regularly went down, so sort of knew the pattern, year 10, year 11, year 12 ... so you're well aware of what they're doing ... there was also another girl from [our town] going there and I think that's something that in the end became important to [our daughter] (Garry, p. 15).

Developing independence was a concern for another family but from a different perspective. When choosing schools for the eldest boy and girl of their large family, Rebecca and Terry were concerned that the responsibility they had already engendered in them through their place in the family not be lost, but rather encouraged further.

...the attraction for the school was its smallness, was the ability to be, and we also took into account the fact that these two kids were the eldest of seven children and they were, they had a responsible position in the family but they were also, it was better for them to be able to go to a place where they could make their own way to be bigger fish in a smaller pond, rather than the old you know, little fish in a big pond ... (Rebecca, p. 3).

Non-religious based imperatives: Education for life long learning.

Understanding the importance of education provided the imperative for George. He described his own attitude to education as being a "passion" (George, p. 4).

...since our children have been babies, and I mean literally since they've been, oh what, since they've been babies there have been books in our household in front of the kids, at their level. We both recognise the value and importance of education (George, p. 4).

George described himself as a life long learner. He had been above average as a student himself but had been propelled into the workforce early due to his family's economic circumstances.

I ended up becoming a trades person and then pursuing education through the rest of my life (George, p. 4).

My aim was that all my children would go to university, and that's one of those sociological things, mum and dad started out in trade, second generation only one of them goes to uni, and then the third generation they all go to uni and fourth generation and so on, I mean, that's sociological phenomena in Australia (George, p. 22).

At the same time, he was realistic about his children:

I mentioned a hope for tertiary education, my over-riding hope for my children is that they would be the best they could possibly be. Whatever that meant, so that ...might not have meant tertiary education. 'Cause I was always privately hopeful that they would've experienced some of my genes for learning capability and um, and that might mean they would go on to university. Now, as it happens, two of them have, one of them has not (George, p. 24).

George had confidently sent his children to the local government primary school and both he and his wife had engaged strongly in the children's support. However, as the time approached for secondary school they were challenged to choose outside the government sector because of the specific needs of their eldest child and George's preoccupation with his children reaching tertiary level and developing life long learning habits. George's tertiary education goals for his children were indicative of his level of engagement in his imperative for life long learning.

Maura and Pat, an Irish couple, had moved to Australia when their eldest son was about to start secondary school. They had come from a family who had previously migrated to England where they had lived as a tight community bound together in many ways by fear and discrimination. On arriving initially in New South Wales, Maura and Pat's eldest son was enrolled in a Catholic school in Sydney, largely by default because they did not at the time understand the diversity of the Australian system and the options available to them.

When we arrived we didn't know anything. A friend of ours said, "There's a Catholic school just up the road". So we fronted up to this Catholic school. We didn't realise it was a private school and that all Catholic schools are private schools. We just fell into that; it wasn't a choice. Looking back, I don't think I would

have changed it, because he made a lot of good friends there” (Maura, p. 7).

Their second son is considerably younger and so, after the experience with their eldest son, they were determined to make a different choice for him. While their eldest son had had a reasonably positive experience of secondary school, there were aspects of the Catholic nature of the school that they found contradictory and unnecessary for their imperatives. Maura had always wanted to be involved with a Montessori type school since she was a child.

...I knew always that I wanted to send a child to either Montessori school or... My sister and I had this idea that she'd be the teacher and I'd run the school. It was going to be a Montessori-type school. So it's always been in the back of my mind (Maura, p. 19).

Maura and Pat investigated what was available in terms of Montessori type schools in Australia and found one in Western Australia. Although it meant that they had to move to the other side of the continent, they were prepared to do so because their imperative was to be able to provide a particular type of education that would benefit their son through its particular educational philosophy.

...it's lovely. It's like Paradise. We've never, since the day he's gone there – he's been there right from kindy – had a day when we weren't thankful that he can go there (Maura, p. 20).

Teresa and her husband, a Western Australian couple, sent their two boys to their local government primary school but felt discouraged by the size of the secondary school within whose boundaries they lived.

I guess with the schools that are around, like [our local high school], which was the next choice - it's a public school and very big. I go that way sometimes and I see the boys when they go through the shops. I think, "I don't really think I'd want [my boys] to be hanging around. But they are allowed to go, aren't they? It's a school boundary. With [the two Colleges we're interested in] they can't. They can't just skip down to the shops and eat McDonalds or whatever. [Our local high school] is a very big school. I prefer a smaller school.... They have about 1,700.... and [the next closest high school] is the same. Because [my husband] is the president of the [primary school] P&C, he goes to the school meetings. They were saying that at [the high school in the next

zone], it's a 1,200 student school and at the moment they have 1,600 or 1,700 students (Teresa, p. 11).

They had considered the nearest Catholic college but were discouraged by its large waiting list and the number of people seeking enrolment. Because their sons were not attending one of the College's Catholic feeder primary schools they were aware that their chances were not good and therefore investigated, and eventually chose, another local private school run by a different Christian denomination. Their imperative was to seek what they considered to be a good education and they were confident that the private school of their choice would provide a quality education because they "select the better teachers" (Teresa, p. 12). The wider family supported their imperative to the extent that the paternal grandfather provided financial backing.

When [my husband's] father passed on, he said, "I'd really like the boys to have a good education." So he made allowances....That money would go towards their education, whether it be high school or university.... They're very lucky children. He realised how important education is (Teresa, p. 14).

Non-religious based imperatives: Proximity and good schooling.

Focusing on good educational standards through her own family's history meant that Suzanne had been educated at a reputable government school and, along with her siblings, had achieved good results. A further imperative for Suzanne was proximity. If a government school close to home has a good reputation, then, other things being equal, that is her preferred option. However, since her own schooling, Suzanne had become aware of a common perception of degradation in the government system.

I think at that time we probably felt that private schools were a better option than the government schools, like anybody else ... and the fact that the state schools were not performing as well as the private schools (Suzanne, p. 7).

Asked for the source of this information, she explained that she had relied on personal experience.

I've been to [my old school] to do a few talks. From my own observations, watching kids - the socio-economic thing - drugs, the whole bit - the whole data of information ... You just see it. The school was run down, there were no finances - just the general look of the kids, the behaviour - the whole structure of the thing. It certainly wasn't like that in my time (Suzanne, p. 8).

The obstacle presented by this change of perception of quality became a motivating factor in Suzanne's engagement in stepping outside the family norm of the local government school. The development of her educational imperatives is based in her own family's background.

My family background was certainly very much Catholic, even though I did go to [a state high school]. The education was a big interest with my parents. My two brothers got degrees as well, and Dad has a degree. So the focus was on, "What's a good school? This is a good school; let's go to it. And it's five minutes down the road." When it came to our kids, I suppose with three kids - two boys and a girl - it's the same thing: Is there a good school very close to home? I didn't want to go through the government schools because I thought a private school seemed to have - I wanted a co-ed one and the private Catholic schools with a Catholic background so you're happy with them being taught that. And also the structure and the thinking and the education (Suzanne, p. 8).

Similar perceptions that government education is in a degraded state emerged in concerns expressed by several participants. Linda, for instance, used the term "surviving" when speaking of her own previous experience in state schools and that of her eldest son today. She remembers thinking about it.

I went to [the local state school] when I was younger. It was a lot stricter than it is now, as far as even uniform was concerned. I remember driving past the school and seeing some of the girls and what they were wearing and thinking, "This school has really gone downhill fast." Then I thought, "God, I'll be sending my child to that school. How will he survive?" But he is pretty level headed - he's my eldest (Linda, p. 4).

For Nicole, her knowledge of the government system from her experiences with the two eldest of her sons, emphasised the lack of quality. She declared, "There

was no way I was sending any more children to [our local] high school” (Nicole, p. 9). She even had difficulties with the primary schooling her two younger sons had had at their local government school.

They had not had good principals. There'd been issues of bullying and all sorts of things – teacher strikes.... I couldn't even go near the school in the end, I'd get so angry, because of different things that were happening (Nicole, p. 9).

Belinda had a similar experience:

I was very unhappy with [the local primary] school – just the things that were going on at the time there with the kids (Belinda, p. 3).

David had a similar perception based on information from other parents. He described the local government senior high school as being,

...1 kilometre away, handy, convenient, free Government, but we thought “No way, he'd get killed there, eaten alive”.... First of all it's a big high school, it's one of the biggest in the state, other people who have children there said it's pretty busy and it would be very rough (David, p. 3).

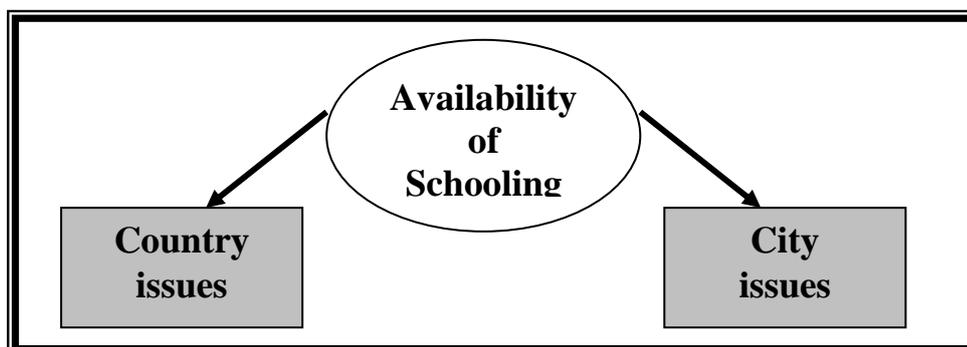
After visiting her local government high school, Rosa's perceptions about the externals of the school were not positive.

...[the] local government school appeared to have had no or limited maintenance due to the uncertainty of it closing. There were no lockers available for students and I observed the students walking around campus with these huge heavy packs on their backs as they had no place to store their books (Rosa, p. 2).

Availability of Schooling

Figure 3.3 shows the dimensions of *availability of schooling*. While initially it seemed that *availability of schooling* was more likely to be an issue for participants from the country, the data revealed that problems of availability similarly arose in the city. This became a concern that challenged some families to review their imperatives and engage in possible choices outside the government sector.

Figure 3.3. Sub-category - Availability of schooling



Country Issues

The experience for rural families always provided some geographically imposed considerations that would not be relevant for metropolitan dwellers. As indicated by participants in the earlier section, they knew that it would be necessary to send their children away to school. For one family the options were to send them to a government school hostel in the nearest large country town or to send them to a boarding school in Perth. The nearest Catholic school was 200km away and had no boarding facilities.

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

In situations such as this the children have to leave home in Year 8 to undertake their secondary education at boarding school. The sadness for the families lies in the realisation that many of these children will never come back, other than for school holidays. There are few opportunities in the country for the sons and daughters who do not return to the land. When asked about the likelihood of the children returning to the country after completing their schooling, Tracey's response was:

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

Tracey's aunt, Betty, faced a similar dilemma when educating her children in their earlier years but found that issues of availability of schools also challenged

her in another direction. Numbers attending Catholic schools during her time of choice were dropping and in order to encourage an order of religious sisters to staff their country Catholic primary school, they had to ensure that they would send their daughters to board at the school in the city run by the same religious order.

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

In the larger country centres there are senior high schools covering Years 8 to 12 and it is possible for local children to complete their education without having to leave home. In smaller towns, however, there are only district high schools that provide only for the compulsory levels of schooling, Years 8 to 10. This leaves most country parents *being challenged to choose* if they want their children to complete a full secondary education. Government hostels, boarding schools, staying with family or friends to attend a metropolitan high school, being home schooled with the aid of distance education support, or extensive bus travel are the most common options.

Garry was very pleased with the quality of the secondary education at the district high school, where he was a teacher at the time of interview. With its 108 students it had sufficient numbers to warrant specialists in several subjects and the teachers were, in his opinion, generally very caring and committed. Garry's knowledge of the teachers in the next town where there was a senior high school gave him some concern, as there was, as he saw it, a problem with staff continuity.

It is ... not so flexible, it's that little bit bigger but not big enough to be, I shouldn't say very flexible, but there's less understanding I think amongst the staff so it's not quite the same caring approach. I mean they're all nice people I'm sure, they just don't take that same interest in their school. They're a lot more itinerant (Garry, p. 15).

As a parent and a country teacher, Garry was generally not supportive of children being sent away to school in Year 8 believing that in most cases

it was not necessary:

... there's no reason to send them away [to boarding school] unless they've got to travel an hour and a half or something on the bus each way [to their local district high school]. Why would you wanna get rid of your kids? I have this argument regularly in [the town] with people who send their kids away in Year 8 and don't have to (Garry, p. 23).

Mary, on the other hand, was concerned that her children might be deprived in important ways from being brought up in the country.

... we think about it and we think are we depriving our kids by being in the country and being no, you know, they really haven't got the opportunities for that extra development in music and drama and all sort of areas that they might be able to do if they were in the city. But then when we say to them, well why don't we move to the city and then you can do it, no, no, no, we like to have our country, we like to be here ... oh we love being here but at times we just feel as though we are in Siberia culturally (Mary, p. 18).

Mary and Gerard, though living and working in the country, were themselves not a farming family. A large part of their reason for not sending their children away for the whole of their secondary schooling was that there was no farm to attract their return to the country.

... the farming family is a little different because quite often their kids are going to come back again. They're only there for their education and they come back to the farm especially if they're boys. Once our kids have left this house to go to boarding school, that's it. They don't live here anymore and they're never going to live with us again. They're going to come home for holidays but they don't live in this house anymore. And to do that at Year 8, like the year they turn 13, I just couldn't bear that nor did the kids want it (Mary, p. 6).

While the lack of availability of schooling in the country challenges the parents to choose, it resides within a context of distressing separation and considerably different family dynamics to those of city families. The often crushing financial burden, especially in an era of rural decline, also needs to be taken into

consideration. Both of these facets are discussed in the next chapter where the focus is on the influence of intervening conditions.

City Issues

The closure of some city high schools (usually for declining enrolments associated with changing demographics) has given concern to some parents and caused them to be challenged to choose.

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

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

Being an immigrant meant that we were not familiar with the school system and options available to students in WA (government, Catholic and private). When our son was in primary school we put his name down for a local Catholic school although he had not been baptised. My partner and I had attended Catholic schools overseas and wanted to keep this option open for our son (Rosa, p. 1).

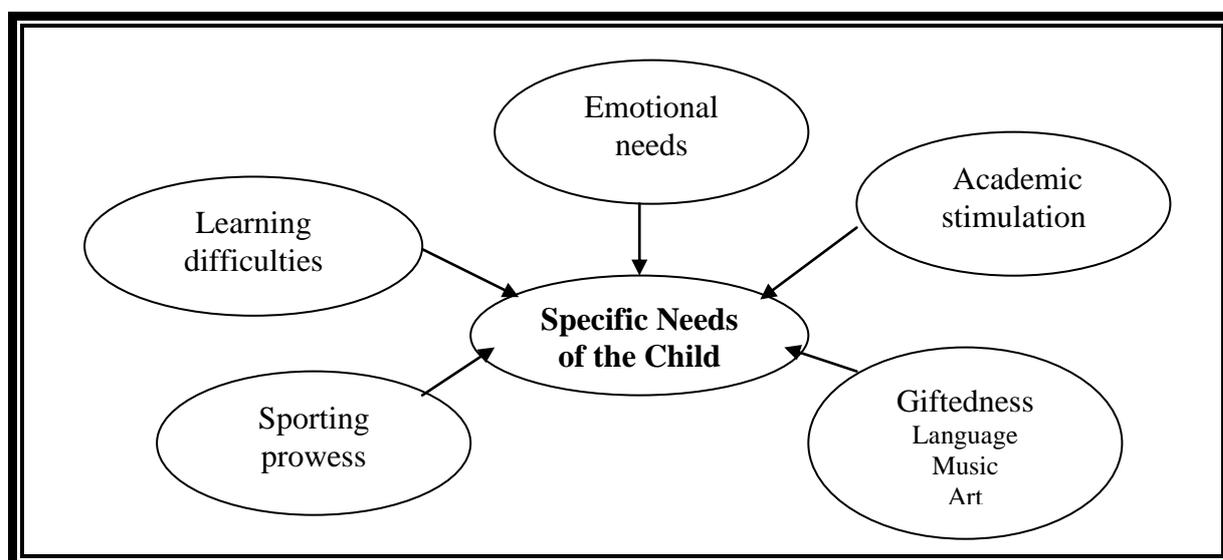
Upon investigation they discovered that because of the closure of a number of nearby government high schools, and the unresolved debate over a proposed mega school intended to replace those being closed, more than 200 families were on the waiting list for the nearest Catholic systemic secondary school. Moreover, because their son was not a baptised Catholic he could only be included in a list for a small number of possible places available to similar applicants. While Rosa had other options in mind initially, the closure of local

government schools, and a fire in another local secondary government school, propelled them into a situation of *being challenged to choose*.

Specific Needs of the Child

Children with specific needs presented for some parents a major causal factor in being challenged to choose. Figure 3.4 shows five dimensions of the sub-category, *specific needs of the child*. While this is not an exhaustive list, it nevertheless indicates the diversity of needs as indicated by the data. Each dimension is discussed in turn to illustrate the ways in which they can contribute to the parents *being challenged to choose*.

Figure 3.4: Sub-category – *Specific needs of the child*



Giftedness

A wide range of special needs was presented by parents who were *being challenged to choose* by factors specific to a particular child. One family had chosen a relatively nearby government high school for their eldest son, which he been able to access through a scholarship, and because the school's reputation for art was exceptional. As Caroline explained:

Ah the eldest went to [the high school] on an art scholarship, he was actually offered a place at a Protestant school but didn't want to go there 'cause um, his personality would have rebelled against the

discipline, so he went to [this particular high school], so he went through the Government system and for him that was a very good choice because of his interest in Art and so on (Caroline, p. 1).

Caroline was well pleased with the result of this choice as their son was receiving excellent stimulation for his artistic giftedness and at the same time was in an atmosphere that required less conformity, a feature that suited his personality.

Academic Stimulation

When choosing for her daughter, Caroline knew that her daughter had very different needs from those of her son (described above) and chose for her a single sex, Catholic, secondary private school.

She is highly intelligent, um, during her primary school she was um, picked on because she was intelligent that we picked up that the government school system doesn't either protects or encourages children who are academically bright. It just lets them ...she was viewed as a "no problem" student cause she was so bright she did her work quietly, she was left alone. But there was no stretching, there was no active encouragement, and also because she was picked on she was quite sensitive about showing that she was intelligent. And um, we thought that from what we'd seen of the [government school] system that it was very likely that that was going to continue into secondary school, um, at a time of her life when she was like, well it was possible that she'd buckle under the system to conform. She would pretend that she wasn't as bright as she was just so that she could have friends or whatever, and, so we saw a very bright girl who had the potential to be crippled by a government system (Caroline, p. 2).

Caroline and her husband are both university graduates and their engagement in their children's schooling was driven both by their strong personal commitment to education, and by the obstacle presented by what they perceived to be the inability of the local government school to realise their daughter's potential.

Appreciation of their eldest son's specific academic gifts and goals moved David and Michelle to make a special choice for his secondary schooling. He

was a gifted language student and even though he had been enrolled provisionally in a private school they had subsequently become unhappy with some aspects of the school and decided to rethink the choice.

...he was enrolled at [the private school] anyway when he was born and so then we kept getting mail saying your child is on our list. It is now time to confirm, now time for interview, now time to pay your deposit (David, p. 6).

Their eventual choice was a government school with a high reputation and capacity to extend their son's language capabilities. Because David and Michelle lived outside the official catchment for this school, they applied for a scholarship based on the boy's excellence and were able to enrol him.

[Our eldest son] got to [this school] because he was a language student and he won a scholarship (David, p. 9).

Learning Difficulties

When speaking of their second son, David explained that his own views had to be subsumed by the special needs of the child.

So [the decision for our second son] came not with just my background and my knowledge and attitude but with an application to him as individual (David, p. 1).

Their son had specific learning, physical and emotional difficulties. While he had matured considerably before moving to secondary school, he still needed special assistance even though his particular difficulties were not obvious.

...our child would have particular needs which are definite and significant...He's not only small he's physically a little cumbersome so he won't do well at sport (David, p. 1).

How is this child developmentally handicapped, and intellectually retarded and yet he's brighter than me at lots of things. Nobody knows how to classify him (David, p. 11).

He needs a school that's sensitive to his physical limitations. His handwriting is very poor and so a school that will cope with that (David, p. 2).

... our initial thought was we'd put that to [the local] Senior High School which is one kilometre away, handy, convenient, free Government, but we thought "No way, he'd get killed there, eaten alive" (David, p. 2).

David and Michelle's eventually chose a Catholic systemic secondary school because of the specialist facilities it had that would help their son to cope with his particular needs. While this choice immediately proved successful, David and Michelle are aware that ongoing support and encouragement from them is necessary because of the effort that it takes him to present the required work.

He's done exceptionally well for the predictions earlier on. So most who meet him would not question his handicap and new teachers say what's the big deal about [your son]? He can just perform normally. And Michelle used to say "He looks fairly good but you don't realise the effort that's gone into this and the struggle, if he reads a book, writes an essay and performs moderately, he's actually put three times as much strain and effort into it as the kid who just scribbles it off (David, p. 11).

Emotional Needs

The decision by some families to make different choices for different children denoted a high level of engagement for the parents in their children's education. One family had chosen the local government primary school for their daughter's education, but when it came to secondary schooling they reconsidered because of the issues that arose towards the end of her primary years. George knew his daughter was being bullied and, while it did not seem to be of a serious nature at first, they became increasingly concerned that the consequences could continue into the local government high school where they had planned to enrol her.

OK, well, there were some slight social problems at Year 7. She was ah, what is now probably called bullying, she was subject to, although I wouldn't give it that terminology, and it was quite affecting her and we had as a precaution put her name down at [a church school], really just to get her pencilled in, just in case (George, p. 7).

George and his wife attended parents meetings at a Christian denominational school, but without any real intent at that time of sending her there. However,

when it became apparent that the pressure on their daughter that had blighted her primary years would follow her into secondary if she remained with the government system, they made the decision to change.

The same group of people that were pressuring her were going to be going to the local high school. We felt that it was important for her growth, her emotional growth, to extract her from that situation and our only other option at that stage, was as we felt, the other option we chose, it wasn't the only other option other than to send her to another government high school, was to send her to [the church school] having, and the reason for that was primarily that we are members of that church (George, p. 7).

This decision then impacted on their second child, a boy, who could be enrolled automatically at the same school due to the school's sibling preference policy.

...having one child at the school and having a preferential place, the school operates with a preferential place for siblings, we thought well, the preferential place is there, we'll use it (George, p. 11).

Garry's priority had been for his daughter's emotional needs. She had been protected and given special encouragement and support throughout her schooling until Year 10 but then needed to move from the country to the city for her upper secondary schooling. Garry's concern about his daughter's emotional frailty and the need for a pastoral care program and school ethos that would support her final years of school was articulated several times in the interview.

And the reason there became I think um, to me, [she] sort of emotional level, ah, to send her off to a big state school, was going to destroy her. It was just beyond her. It just doesn't have, I suppose I reflect, I mean I loved high school, um, as I said earlier, socially, but when I reflect back to it I just couldn't see [her] surviving in some of these big schools (Garry, p. 18).

Sporting Prowess

In choosing secondary schooling for her two boys, Linda faced two quite different challenges. Her eldest son went through the government system successfully and was, at the time of the interview, completing an apprenticeship, an outcome that was especially satisfying for the mother.

It was a dream, actually. He's the type of character that sails through things – nothing really upsets him. He seems to go on. He's not a troublemaker or anything like that – he's quite level headed (Linda, p. 5).

The second son, however, was a “much more demanding child” (Linda, p.5). He was an extroverted child who needed much more attention and had a high interest and ability level in sports.

He went to the same state primary school [as his brother] and that was fine. I knew he'd be fine there. When it came to high school, I thought, “In [the local high school], is he going to get hurt?” He's very, very involved in sports - sports orientated. At [the local high school] they didn't have a lot of sports where school was involved and he didn't have that nautical interest like [his brother] had (Linda, p. 6).

The mother then directed her attention to finding a suitable school and enrolled him in a large private Catholic boys' school.

Well, I'd heard that they're a very sporting school and they pride themselves on their sporting achievements. You just have to go to the school and have a look around at all the sporting ovals and facilities and you know very well ... (Linda, p. 6).

For her eldest son there had been no thought of schooling outside of the government sector, although she did speak in terms of survival when she referred to her own education at government schools, and also that of her son.

I was educated in the government system. I'm the last of six children, so our parents were in no position to put us through private schools. We all survived the schools (Linda, p. 1).

He didn't even think of private school and neither did I, at that stage, because he was so intent on doing this nautical studies course at [the local government high school]. I said, “Well, if that's going to keep you interested at school and survive state school, then go for it” (Linda, p. 4)

Mary and her husband gave special consideration for their choice of school for their son because of his exceptional sporting prowess and desire for success in football. They were able financially to support their son's desire and had confidence in his own capacity to make the choice for the particular college that would support his exceptional capacity and lead him into a career as a professional athlete.

[Our son] was excelling at everything at [our town] and he went to [the local district high school] which um, quickly ceased to challenge him after a couple of years. Meanwhile a couple of his friends had gone to [a city boarding school] and he was pretty keen to go to [there] and join them and get into a bigger field and he particularly specified [this college] because he wanted to be in a big field, he wanted to be in a big pond where he could spread his wings and take on the bigger challenge, and he also knew that [their] football team had talent scouts from the various [laugh] WAFL clubs and you know, he could see, right from the time he was four years old he knew he was going to be an AFL footballer so he'd worked out that his best pathway was to go to [the college] and get into their A grade team and eventually captain their A grade team and then from there play for [this footy team] and on to AFL. So [his] course of schooling was mostly determined by his football career. That's what he, he worked it out (Mary, p. 12).

Nicole had struggled in bringing up two boys from her husband's previous marriage and had found great difficulties in keeping them engaged and involved at their local government high school. Although she had engaged herself in the school wherever possible, and tried to stay in touch, both boys eventually dropped out of school and continued along a difficult path. The next two boys were her own and she was determined that they would not go to the same high school. Their third boy had excellent sporting prowess and was very attractive to girls, so they chose a single sex private school that had excellent sporting facilities and programs.

...girls were a problem. He was also sporting. There was no way I was sending any more children to [the local] high school. I couldn't get them into [the

preferred government high school]. It was a case of looking back. When I'd been at school, [the college] was always known for the networking. It was networking that had a big part to play, but also when we started going into it, it was the pastoral care and the sporting side of things (Nicole, p. 9).

It was a successful choice, and their fourth son followed by attending the same college. Even though he did not have the same physical talent as his brother, he found value in the community service program and stimulation in the academic excellence of the college. Nicole had been challenged to choose outside the local government system because of her bad experiences with the two older boys and the sporting prowess exhibited by their third son.

Conclusion

Careful analysis of the kinds of data discussed in this chapter produced a grounding for the basic social concern named *being challenged to choose*. As this chapter has shown, the participants have been challenged to choose education outside of their local government schooling because of the presence of factors related to their own family imperatives, the availability of schooling, or their children's special needs. These causal conditions exist within the overall context of the parents' need or concern to make choices regarding the schooling of their children. Some of the participants responded to only one of the causal conditions, while for others it was a combination of factors and their interrelatedness that moved them into the arena of choosing outside of the locally provided government education.

PERSONAL NOTES

Discerning the problem or cause for concern proved to be the most difficult part of writing this grounded theory. Initially I was asking the question "What motivates parents to choose Catholic schooling?" This made it impossible to find the prime concern of parents as the question was wrongly focussed. The Grounded Theory Seminar group helped me to see my data differently and focus

on grounded theory questions such as “What is this data a study of?” “What category does this incident indicate?” “What is actually happening in the data?” Once I began to concentrate on these questions the real concerns of the parents became clearer and the core concern began to develop. This clarity also showed me that I was too narrowly focussed in my data collection and so I began to seek data from families using many different types of schooling.