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A grounded theory: Realising family potential through choice of schooling

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CHAPTER 6

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REALISING FAMILY POTENTIAL THROUGH CHOICE OF SCHOOLING

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Introduction

The previous three chapters have described in detail, with supporting data, the phenomenon under study and the way in which the participants have resolved their concerns pertaining to that phenomenon, namely, the decisions parents make when choosing forms of schooling for their children. The present chapter, integrating the findings of those three chapters, brings together the whole of the substantive grounded theory, this time without the data, in order to convey its essentials in a parsimonious manner. The theory 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.

The chapter concludes with a single diagram that presents the entire theory.

Research Overview

The present study focussed on developing a substantive theory through the grounded theory method that would explain and give meaning to the process through which the family moves when faced with the issue of school choice. Rich descriptions of the family context and motivations that affected decisions

about their children's schooling elucidated the basic social concern of *being challenged to choose.*

The core process that emerged during this present study involved *realising family potential* as each family endeavoured to use school choice decisions to make the best possible use of their potential. The family moved through two phases in the process, *making the choice* and *managing the choice.* A level of stability is achieved when the family has made a choice that is believed to be optimal under the present circumstances. The family maintains this choice unless it is challenged by something that appears to threaten the family's realisation of their potential.

Many families, especially those who are highly engaged in choice issues, remain vigilant as they constantly review the choices that they have made. It became evident through the development of this theory that making a choice does not necessarily guarantee the desired outcome. While a family's goals may remain relatively fixed in regard to the realisation of their family potential, changes in the context may well demand a subsequent review of the appropriateness of the original choice to the extent that the process needs to be re-engaged.

Changes are continually being made about school choice, as there are many intervening conditions that influence the process. They are the "broad and general conditions bearing upon action/interactional strategies" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 103) that make a difference to the movement of families through the process of *managing the choice* and *maintaining the choice*. Some of these conditions were imposed by outside influences while some were directly related to the experience of being in the school chosen.

Foundation of the Study

The prime focus of this study was to uncover and explore the meanings surrounding the choices that families make in regard to government or non-government secondary schooling in Western Australia. Such family choices are situated in a particular context that has historical, political, and sociological and,

in some cases, theological influences. This context was described in Chapter 1 in some detail and sets the scene for the elaboration of the theory. The central concern of parents was identified and then the theory was developed that explained and interpreted the decision making process through which the interviewed Western Australian families moved as they sought to satisfy their concerns and goals in relation to secondary schooling choices. It also incorporates the various intervening conditions that caused variations within the process for different families and, in some cases, for different children within a family.

<div align="center">**Concern Shared by Families**</div>

This present study discovered three particular conditions that caused families to move into *being challenged to choose*. As described in Chapter 1, these conditions exist within 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 6.1 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*. There was extensive variation in the specific needs of the child as each individual brings their own set of needs and differences. The range of such needs is described through the data in Chapter 3.

*Figure 6.1. **Being challenged to choose***
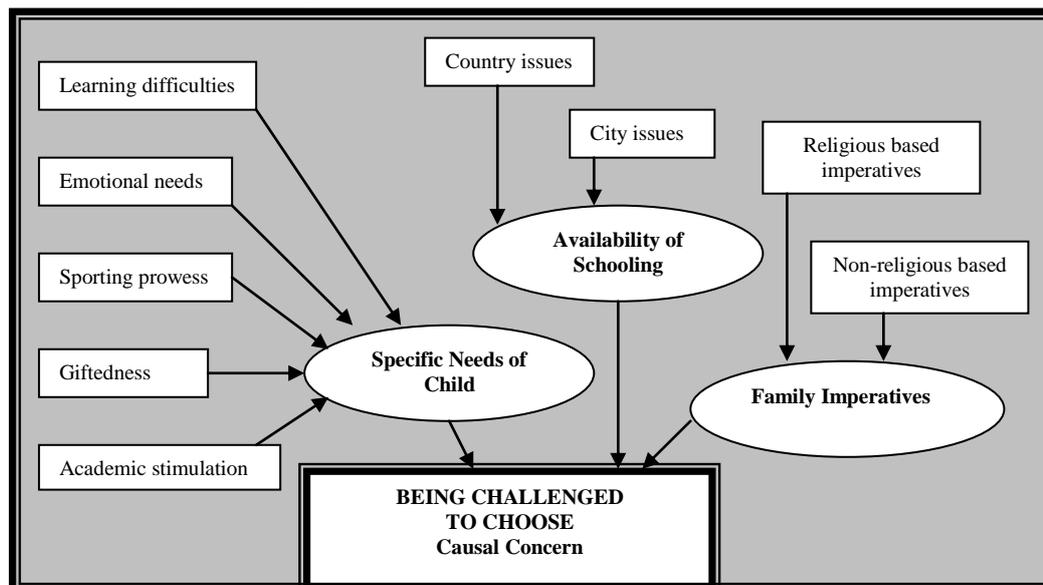
Family Imperatives

While a number of reports list religion as being an important aspect of choice (Anderson, 1990, 1993; Flynn, 1993a, 1993b, 2000; Sensis, 2004), the present 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 a 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 fulfilment of a child's sporting potential can offer social mobility as well 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 present 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. As has been described in detail in Chapter 4, 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 6.2 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.

*Figure 6.2.* **Core category of** *realising family potential*
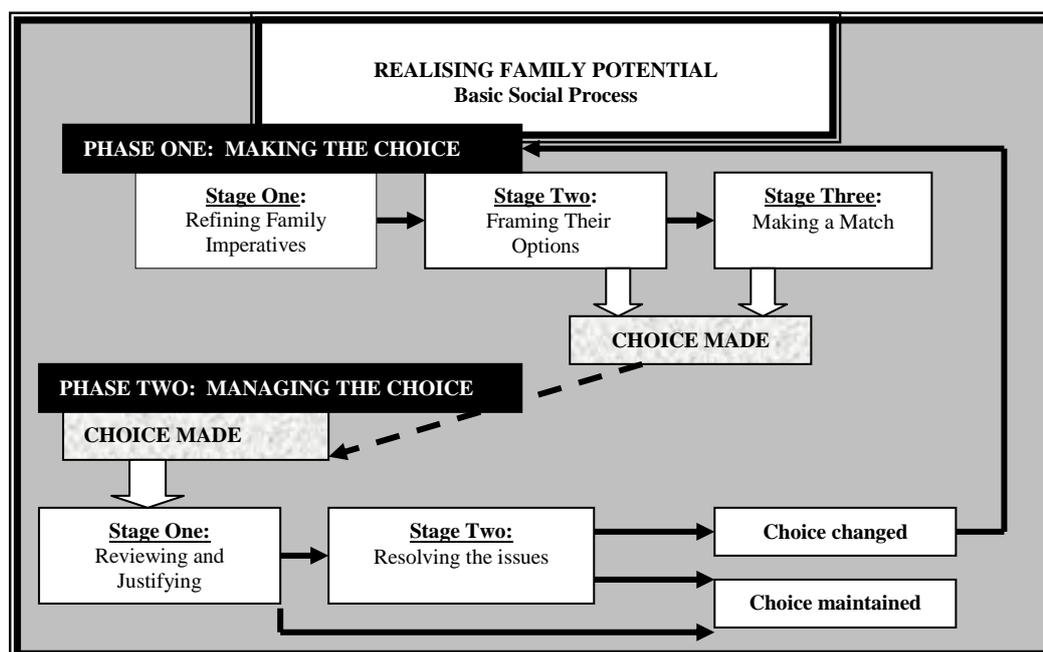
As can be seen, the basic social process modelled by the theory moves first though an initial phase that leads through three linked stages to the point at which the *choice is made*, and then through a subsequent two-stage phase of *managing the choice*, the result of which may be either to *maintain 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, drawing from the discussion of their development that was presented in detail in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

Phase One: Making the Choice

As was explained in Chapter 4, 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 6.3 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 6.3. **Stage One – *Refining family imperatives,* with intervening conditions**
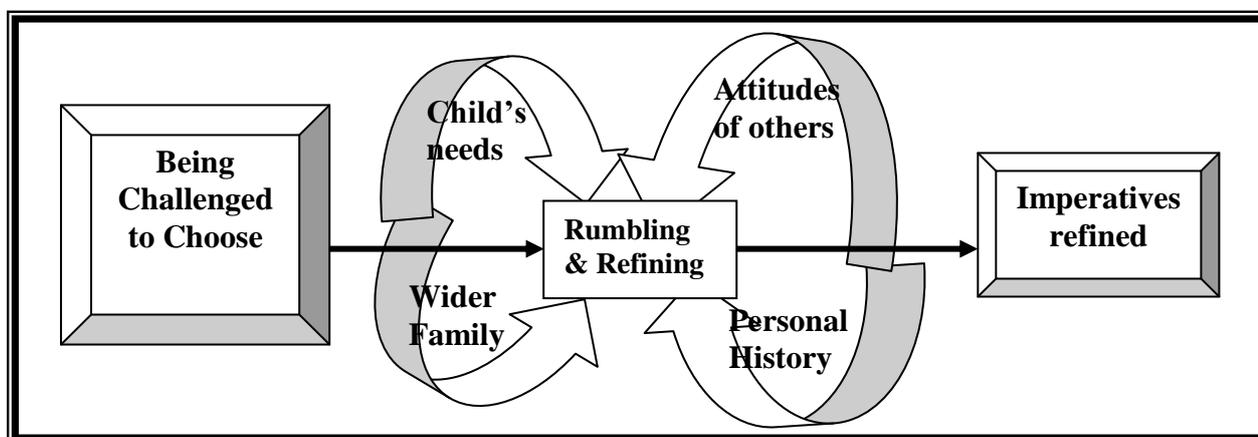
Once the family's imperatives have been suitably clarified and ordered in this way, the parents move to frame their viable options by identifying from among the available schools those that appear to be consistent with their imperatives and aspirations and worthy of further detailed consideration and evaluation. As depicted in Figure 6.4, 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 fa*ctors, 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 6.4 **Stage Two – *Framing their options,* with intervening conditions**
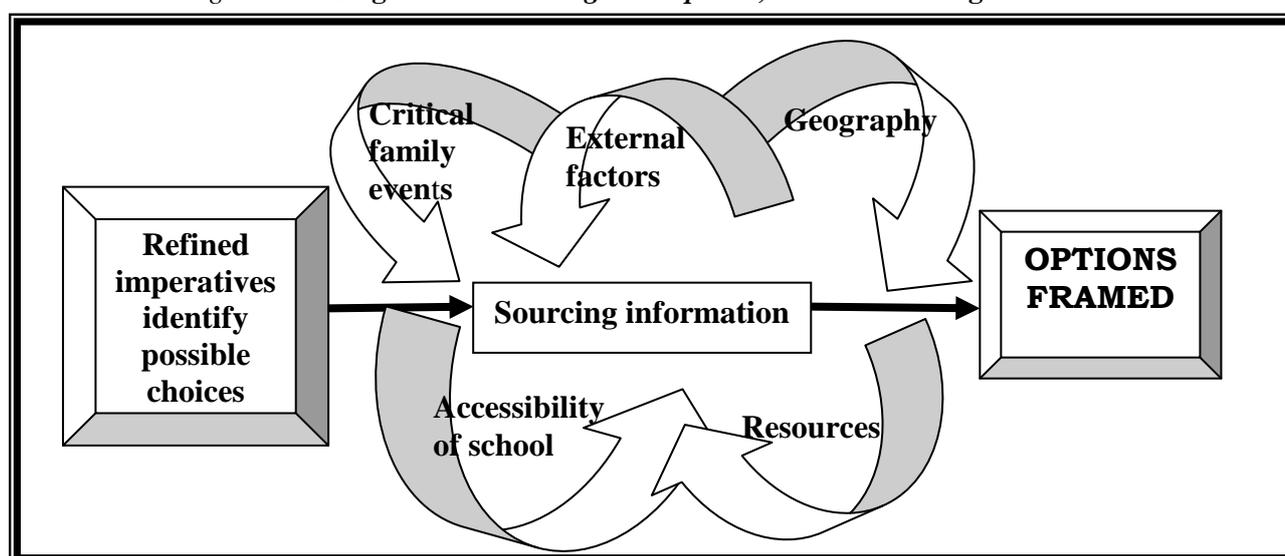
If the frame generated from the sourcing and evaluating activities in Stage Two includes more than one school, the family typically then engage in a *balancing* action where the relative merits of the framed options are compared and weighed against the outcomes the parents are seeking. As shown in Chapter 4, 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 6.5.

*Figure 6 5.* **Stage Three –** *Making a match,* **with intervening conditions**
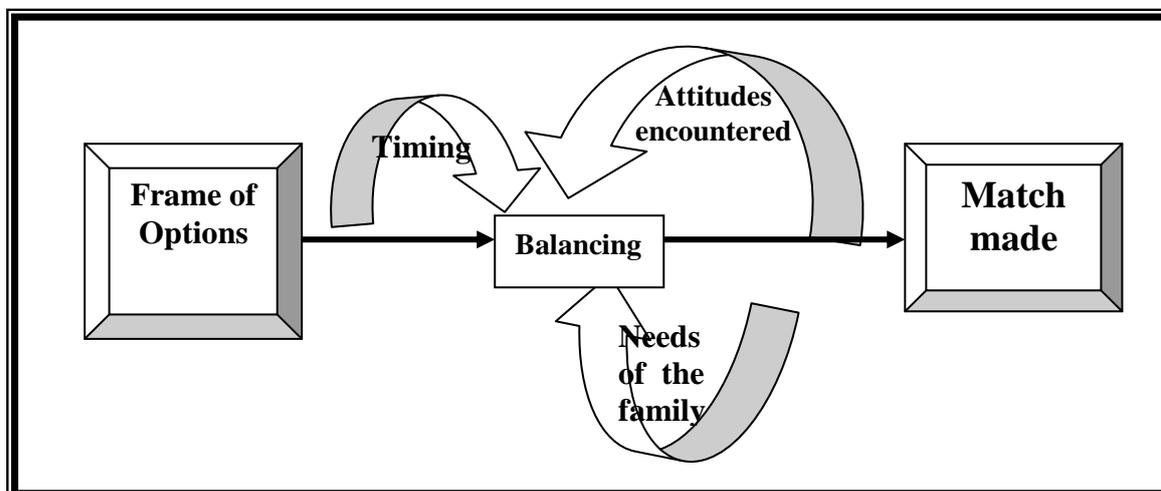
Had there been just one school remaining within the frame of viable options at the end of Stage Two of Phase One, the *balancing* action that would otherwise be a feature of Stage Three would not be required and *making the choice* would be essentially an automatic outcome, in which case Phase One would 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 6.6, 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 6.6.* **Intervening conditions within Stage One in Phase Two**
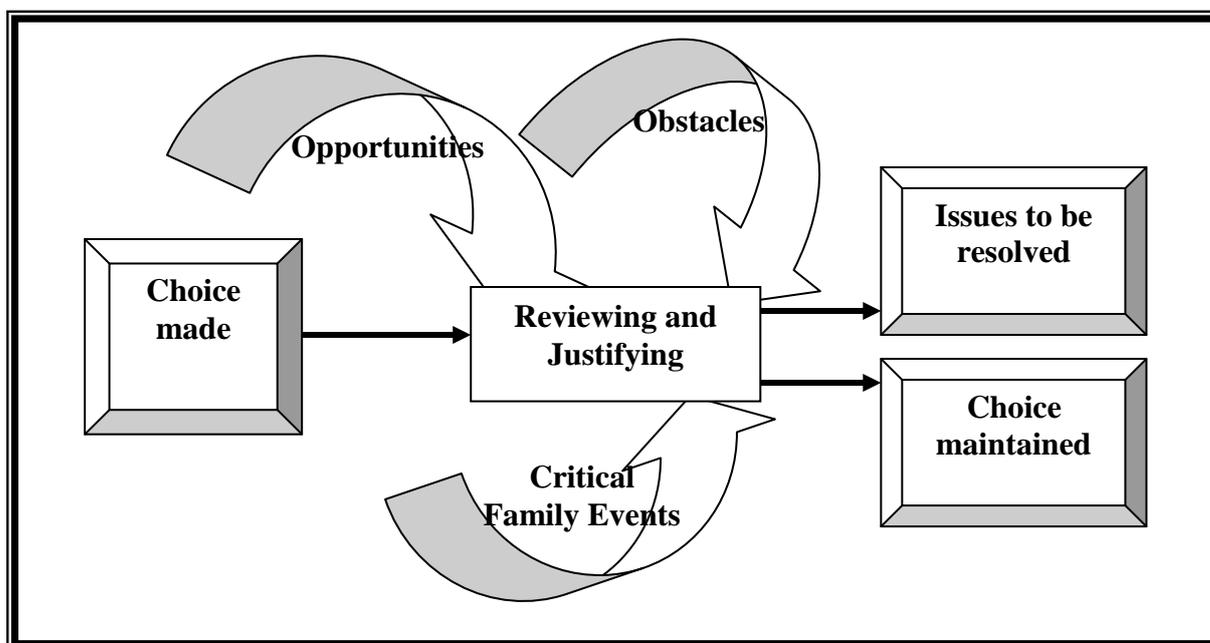
If, in the family's assessment, the initial choice has been and remains efficacious, the child's enrolment in the school can be maintained as it is seen to be continuing to satisfy what the family wants, their availability issues and the needs of the child. But where the original choice is considered 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 6.7.

Figure 6.7 **Grounded Theory of *Realising Family Potential***
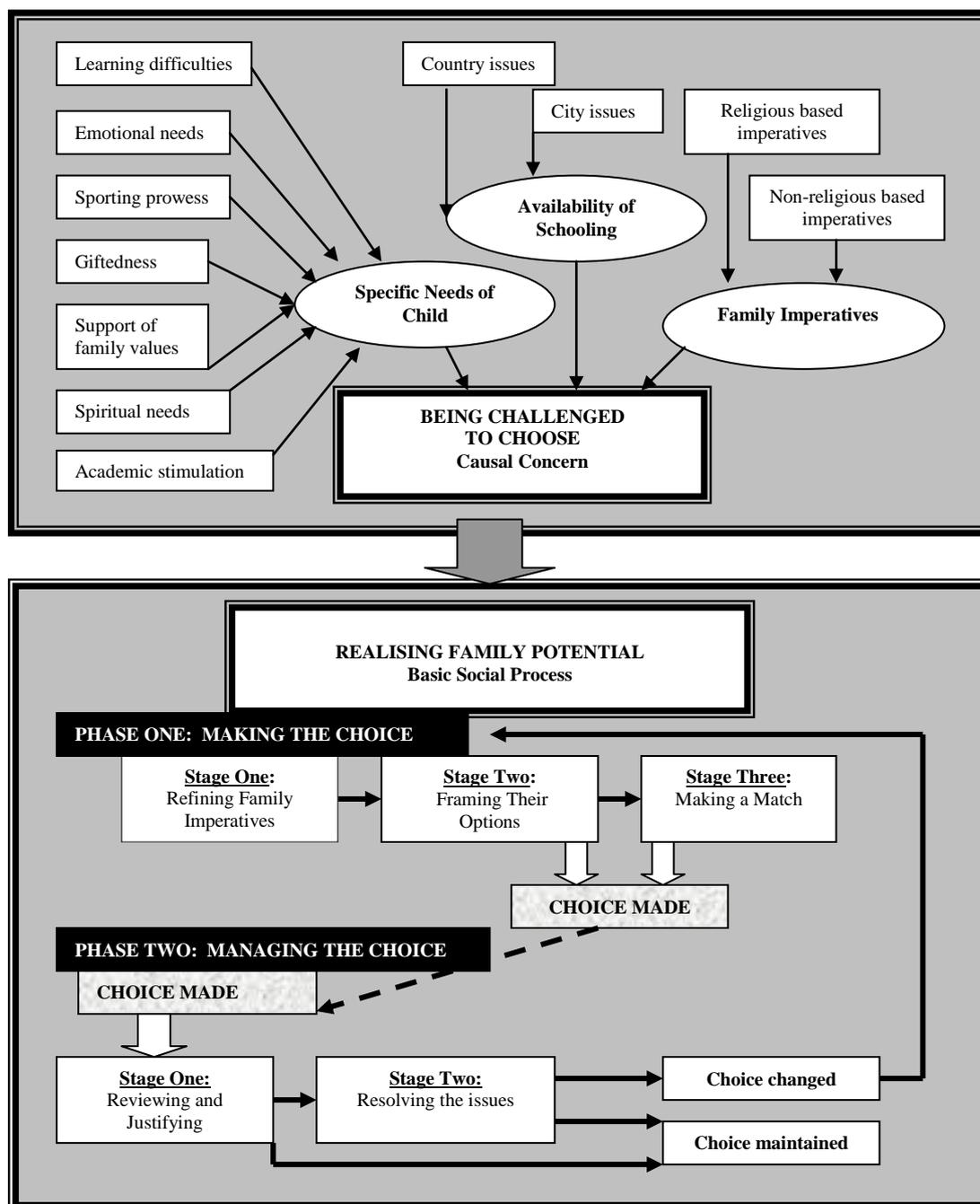
As was explained in detail in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the complete theory developed from the data includes both the discovered social process that is directed towards the *realisation of family potentia*l, and the underlying causal concern of *being challenged to choose* that provides the stimulus and necessity 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 availability.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided 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. Despite a considerable search of available literature, no other substantive grounded theory dealing with the phenomenon of school choice was found. To this extent, the present study has made an original contribution.

PERSONAL NOTES

Where the theory had been presented with examples from the full set of data it was too extensive to allow the whole theory to be seen in parsimonious clarity. The presentation of the theory in its entirety attempts to bring the whole theory together. This chapter was not in the original plan but is valuable in its presentation of the complete theory. I had originally attempted to place the theory from the present study within a much larger framework but it went well beyond what was possible here and offers an opportunity for further work.