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A grounded theory: Realising family potential through choice of schooling

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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

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It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. (Aristotle)

Introduction

The present study has discovered, described, explored and analysed the phenomenon of school choice in Western Australia using the grounded theory method. Using the specialised analytic methods of grounded theory development the researcher was able to identify among the subjective experiences contained in the told stories of all of the parents who participated in the study, the existence of a common intent or strategic preoccupation that gave purpose, direction and meaning to what they were seeking to achieve through their deliberations and decisions about the schooling of their children.

This common orientation, which has been named *realising family potential* in order to convey the subjective purpose that was found to run through all of the parents' accounts, was identified as the basic social process of the resulting grounded theory. It represents the underlying essence of what all of the studied participants were doing, in a strategic or actualising sense, when seeking to choose one school from the options they saw as being available to them. In all of the cases examined, this common social process or quest was triggered by an event, or an experience, or a perception, that produced a level of concern that in turn led to the parents *being challenged to choose* in order to find resolution of

their concerns. This shared experience of *being challenged to choose* became what has been named as the basic social concern in the grounded theory.

For all of the studied parents, the common process of realising family potential was found to consist of two distinct phases – first, *making the choice*, and then *managing the choice* once it has been made. Furthermore, it was found that the ways that individual families moved through this common process was governed by intervening conditions, specific to the family and its particular circumstances, that shaped and influenced what the parents considered would enhance outcomes for the child and for the family as a whole.

Analysis of the data made it clear also that the reality for all parents is that the process of *realising family potential* is an ongoing and dynamic process that extends through the whole of the child's schooling years, and is not something that is 'over and done with' once the initial decision is taken. In each case, though to varying degrees of engagement, the parents clearly understood that their underlying goal of achieving the best for their child and the family required ongoing vigilance and review in order to ensure that at any point the child's and the family's best interests are kept in the foreground of their thinking and decision-making. Whether to maintain the child in the school originally chosen, or to look to other options that seem to offer better prospects under the circumstances, was a feature in all of the stories shared by the participants.

It was also clear from the stories related by the participants that families typically do not see school choice as an isolated issue, but rather as a highly important part of the way in which the family is nurtured so that the potential of the family itself is enhanced. For most parents, the goals and decision making related to school choice are not seen as a matter simply of securing the best possible educational or social outcomes for the child but are addressed within the context of a much broader range of considerations that bear upon the well-being and future for the family as a whole, including its economic prospects, social and spiritual aspirations, and its ongoing cohesion as a family. It is in this sense that a family's decision-making about schooling involves much more than simply deciding on which school appears best suited to the child's

educational needs. It requires careful consideration also of the impact that any particular choice of school will have on a broad range of other aspects of the child's and the family's continuing development and well-being. Realising a child's educational potential is thus seen by most families within, and as an integral part of, a more holistic concern for realising family potential in the broader sense.

Relationship with Other Theories about Decision Making

Although there does not appear in the literature of school choice to be any similarly comparably comprehensive theory of what parents are doing, in a strategic sense, when making decisions about the schooling of their children, there are many alternatives theories about decision-making in general that might usefully be compared with the theory presented from the present study. Of particular interest would be the extent to which they overlap or complement the explanatory contributions that have emerged from the present study's inductively-grounded approach to theory development. Or, to put it differently, would there be particular interpretations or insights revealed by the present study's in-depth qualitative approach that would have been unlikely to have emerged had the process followed the methodologies that have been used in other studies of decision-making? Such a discussion is valuable at this point in the thesis as the theory has now been presented clearly and it is appropriate to note any congruence between the grounded theory of *realising family potential* and other decision-making theories that could be relevant in the substantive area.

The following discussion looks briefly at four different model types that have achieved some prominence within the general literature on decision-making, each of which offers a specific approach to the way in which people behave when engaged in making decisions.

Ethnographic Decision Models

Ryan and Russell (2000) provide a description of Ethnographic Decision Models (EDMs). These models are “qualitative, causal analyses that predict

behavioural choices under specific circumstances” (Ryan & Russell, p. 787). EDMs represent an aggregate decision process and do not necessarily represent what is going on inside people’s heads (Ryan & Russell, p. 789). The grounded theory produced by the present study does not represent such an aggregate decision process. The core category of *realising family potential* shows the family trying to resolve their concerns about their choice of education in the wider perspective of their desire for realising their family potential. The present theory reveals what is going on inside people’s heads and what goal-directed meaning they attach to their actions; it does not predict what a family will do when making educational choices.

Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory has been used throughout social science (Miller, 2004; Quackenbush, 2004) and much criticism of its value has been in terms of the “rationality of rational choice theory” (Quackenbush, p. 88). Science seeks to explain the world in which we live by formulating theories that can be tested and then be useful in simplifying the complexities that they seek to explain (Quackenbush, p. 89). An assumption (or axiom) is made and then tested. Rational choice theory is a “descriptive phrase used to describe any of a number of individual theories that use the rationality assumption” and it “assumes that the outcomes are the result of choices made by actors” (Quackenbush, p. 92). Within the development of the grounded theory in the present study, there seemed to be many occasions where factors influencing the decision did not seem rational, but which, on closer examination, showed a level of underlying rationality. For example, when one mother sought to enrol her daughter in the Catholic high school that she herself had attended as a child, the smell of the corridor brought back unpleasant memories and so she discontinued her enrolment endeavours (Sally, p. 4). This seems to be an irrational statement but Quackenbush (2004) claims that since the person concerned is acting according to her own preferences then she is acting rationally (Quackenbush, p. 93). Since grounded theory is not formed from assumptions and then tested, there is little congruence to be noted except that it could be used as a way of testing the final theory that has been developed and presented in this study.

Bosetti (2004 p. 388), considering policies made by school governing bodies, states that most school choice planning assumes that the choices made by parent follow a rational choice model. However, she maintains that recent research

... indicates that the context of parental decision-making is far more complex than the result of individual rational calculations of the economic return of their investment in particular education options (Hatcher, 1998). Parental choice is part of a social process influenced by salient properties of social class and networks of social relationships.

This is congruent with the present study, as this grounded theory has produced a model that shows all of the influences and meanings that parents attach to their decision-making in relation to school choice and the complexity of the social relationships that are involved.

Framing Effects

An interesting congruence of information exists between this grounded theory and research on framing effects. Chaves and Montgomery (1996) talked about framing effects in human decision-making in regard to religious choice. They found that standard rational choice theory “assumes that an individual’s preferences are not affected by the framing of a choice problem” (Chaves & Montgomery, p. 129) but they discovered that decision frames do affect preferences in religious choices and the present study also discovered that framing of options was a definite stage in the decision-making process. It was important in that the decision would be very different if the bases of the framing of their options were different. Both framing effects, as discussed by Chaves and Montgomery (1996), and the framing of options as described in the present study, are dependent on context and intervening conditions. The participants in this study framed their options by refining their own family imperatives – what are the things that are most important to the family? If those imperatives were changed the entire result could be changed. Miller (2004, p. 30), who was also looking at religious choice, asserts “humans will choose and pursue spiritual goods in the same way they pursue material ones – according to their interests and by calculation”, that is, by framing the options presented by an examination of their interests and calculated in relation to the conditions that intervene at that particular time.

Random Utility Model

Decision-making models provide information that is useful to policy makers and offer some means of predicting or explaining the decisions on specific issues (DesJardins, Ahlburg & McCall, 2006). The authors show that the Random Utility Model can be used to determine the factors influencing student enrolment decisions in higher education using an underlying assumption “that students have a set of schooling and non-schooling alternatives and they will attempt to maximize their net utility when making their schooling decisions” (DesJardins, Ahlburg & McCall, p. 386). While this type of theory development is useful as a predictive factor for policy makers, the grounded theory of the present study does not operate to give predictive information, but rather to understand the reasons behind the decision and therefore offer a different way in which to consider other research findings.

Usefulness of Theory

Why make a theory? Why do we want a theory on this subject and has grounded theory been successful in delineating the emergent theory of school choice? Thomas (1997) examines the allure of theory in education despite the “emergence of strong anti-theoretical strands in postmodern thought” (Thomas, n.p.). He challenges the process of theorising in education and contends that such theorising places serious obstacles to thought thereby lessening its possibilities of being creative and anarchic. However, educational research for higher degrees demands that studies be shown to have value and relevance within the context of current research. Thomas declares that theory occupies a rarefied position because of its supposed success in science. Theories can become dangerous when they oversimplify and force “the worlds in which we work into theoretical molds (*sic*)” (Thomas, n.p.) which can lead to distortion and misperceptions.

Grounded theory has the advantage of coming from the opposite direction so is not reliant on previous theories (which may be in error) because it distils explanatory notions from data (Thomas, 1997, n.p.). The value of the grounded theory produced by the present study is that it is a specific investigation into the meanings behind what the family is doing when it makes choices about

schooling and it does not force any realities into theoretical moulds, but rather presents a theory that has emerged from actual data.

Potential for Further Research

The grounded theory developed in the present study is complete in its interpretation and analysis of the concern and process that engages parents on the issues of choice of schooling. However, when reflecting personally on the theory and what it might mean in a more general sense, it has occurred to me that there may be a yet more powerful metaphor to distil the essence of what the parents ultimately are doing or seeking to achieve. Midway through the study, a revelational insight surfaced that provided a strikingly rich image – evidenced incidentally in one of the memos presented for another purposes in Chapter 2 – that sought to capture in my own mind what parents are doing in their efforts to realise the potential of their family. That image, captured only fleetingly at the time and not developed further or validated in the theory itself, is an image I had at the time named ‘wombing the future’. As my thinking has now turned to speculation about the broader context within which the discovered social process of realising family potential might usefully be interpreted, the potential of this biological analogy of the mother’s nurturing of an unborn child in the womb being used to understand more fully what motivates family’s in their decision making in general is enticing.

As the participants in the study spoke of the responsibility of raising their children to adulthood, they acknowledged the fundamental importance of raising them to adulthood safely and securely, such that they would be able to take their place independently and successfully as well-formed and fulfilled independent members of their communities in the widest sense. Many of the participants used the notion of “doing their best” in a broad sense to underline that their concern for their children is ultimately far reaching. They engage in balancing their own expectations, and those of their children, with the potential that is there to be realised and see that support and protection of their own identity and values are paramount while they engage in wombing the future to encase the realisation of their potential. The image of wombing the future thus holds

encouraging potential for understanding this phenomenon of what parents do in relation to schooling within the broader context of the other aspects of family life and the needs that must be fulfilled.

This speculative understanding of the broader context within which the findings of the present study might be further situated and interpreted offers an intriguing opportunity for further research, with two particular strands that could be pursued. First, it would be of interest to return to the participants of the present study to explore with them the extent to which this metaphor of wombing the future resonates with their understanding and experience. Second, if this context is in fact broader than school-choice and encompasses other dimensions of the decision-making activities within families, it may be useful to explore the extent to which the current grounded theory model can encompass and explain the family's decision-making in other dimensions of their lives as they seek to fulfil their potential.

A further area of interest is the interrelatedness of family and school in the development of the child and was referred to in Chapter 1 in the sociological contextualisation of the theory. This has implications for assistance to families where such support is necessary to increase the success of proposed educational outcomes and to resource the areas where there is need to redress inequalities. Where schools in low socio-economic areas reflect particular social problems that affect the learning of the child, other social support mechanisms might need to be established linking the school and community.

The exploration of cultural, human and social capital and their relationship to parental involvement and school choice could also reveal rich possibilities for further research. More ideas about capital of different kinds are emerging and they offer further ways of understanding the whole issue of family engagement in education.

Should school choice widen even further as it has done in other places in the world? There could be investigations into the way in which particular kinds of teachers could be encouraged to teach in lower SES schools where the job

satisfaction and value given to their endeavours would have a different focus than in other types of schools. This could build on the work being done in New Zealand (Fiske & Ladd, 2003). As increased school choice widens the variety of education styles available to a very pluralistic Australian community, there would be a need to ensure that there are quality teachers in all areas. I would argue that, as academic results do not measure the full value and success of a school, then the particular areas of enrichment that each school can offer needs to be examined, formulated and expressed within the community.

The relationship between religious motivation and choice of schooling also deserves further investigation with a focus on social justice issues that are critical within Christian ideals (Bezzina, 2000). Theological perspectives need to be developed as the enrolment in schools with a religious focus is increasing and the family interest in, and expression of, their spiritual nature is changing. If the major contact between Church and family is the school, then the relationships and implications for ecclesiology open up rich areas of research as the Catholic Church responds to the “signs of the times” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965, para. 4).

PERSONAL NOTES

Completion of a work such as the present study gives rise to reflections on the process itself. There were times where I found the isolation required for this project to be a very difficult barrier to completion. My learning style was seriously challenged as I function more effectively as a collaborative learner. To complete this study therefore required me to develop a capacity for totally individual work and a capacity to analyse and synthesise ideas in a complex way that I had not previously encountered. The success of such a development was greatly assisted by my supervisor who delighted in sharing the product of such thought processes and challenging the conclusions that I had reached. Such stimulation was invaluable as a contribution to the finished thesis. It also required a trustworthy proofreader who could view the wordy product in a completely objective way and provide accurate feedback that supported the final result.

Life continues despite projects such as this one and during the development of this thesis we had many births (6 grandchildren), deaths (my father, to whom this thesis is dedicated, my brother-in-law and a grandson) and marriages (of two of our children as well as numerous members of our wider family) as well as other serious crises of health and living. While this has extended the time taken to do the thesis, it has anchored it in the richness of life.