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# **Mothers and School Choice: Effects on the Home Front**

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**Claire Aitchison**

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University of Technology, Sydney

## Certificate of Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of any requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help I have received in the research and preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## Table of Contents

1.	<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
1.1	Background.....	1
1.2	Purpose and scope of the study.....	3
1.3	The research problem and the research questions.....	6
1.4	Contextualising the study.....	7
1.4.1	The global context.....	8
1.4.2	The Australian context.....	9
1.4.3	The family context.....	10
1.5	Methodological orientations.....	11
1.6	Significance of the study.....	14
1.6.1	Significance for stakeholders.....	14
1.6.2	Significance for theory building.....	15
1.7	Outline of the thesis.....	16
1.8	Conclusion.....	18
2.	<b>MARKETS AND SCHOOLS</b> .....	19
2.1	Introduction.....	19
2.2	The changing face of school education.....	19
2.2.1	New directions in the provision of schooling: Neoliberalism and economic imperatives.....	20
2.2.2	Neoliberal markets in education.....	22
2.3	Market effects: Competition, curriculum and school management.....	24
2.4	Market effects: Social dimensions.....	28
2.5	Educational marketisation in Australia and NSW.....	33
2.5.1	The contemporary landscape.....	36
2.5.2	Middle Australia and market-orientated schooling.....	40
2.6	Conclusion.....	42
3.	<b>FAMILIES AND MARKETS</b> .....	43
3.1	Introduction.....	43
3.2	Families and markets.....	43
3.3	Australian families: Changing times.....	45
3.3.1	Marriage and parenting: Structural changes.....	47
3.3.2	Working for the family: Paid and unpaid.....	49
3.4	The family-school relationship.....	53
3.5	The gendered face of marketplace engagement.....	58
3.5.1	Parents' and schools: Keeping Mum invisible.....	60
3.6	Conclusions.....	63
4.	<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	65
4.1	Introduction.....	65
4.2	Research Approach.....	66
4.3	Study design and implementation.....	72
4.3.1	The site of the study.....	73
4.3.2	Recruitment.....	75
4.3.3	Data generation.....	76

4.3.4	Ethical considerations .....	83
4.3.5	Analysing and interpreting the data .....	86
4.3.6	Presenting the data .....	90
4.4	Understanding the participants.....	92
4.4.1	The women.....	93
4.4.2	The women and their families.....	95
4.4.3	The women, their families and their socio-economic contexts.....	97
4.5	Conclusion .....	99
<b>INTERLUDE - Introduction to data chapters.....</b>		<b>101</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>MOTHERS AS EDUCATIONAL SHOPPERS: A MARKETER'S DREAM?</b> .....	<b>103</b>
5.1	Introduction and theoretical framing.....	103
5.2	The local market: Secondary schooling in Sydney's inner west.....	105
5.3	Mothers as educational shoppers .....	107
5.4	School choice as shopping .....	113
5.5	Information Gathering: Step One.....	115
5.5.1	The Sales-pitch: School publicity, prospectuses, websites .....	115
5.5.2	(Un)Popular gossip - The media .....	118
5.5.3	Trade fairs - Schools Expos, The Good Schools Guide.....	120
5.5.4	Pacing the aisles - School site visits and telephone inquiries .....	121
5.5.5	Getting the low-down – Networking and insider trading.....	127
5.6	Conclusion .....	134
<b>6.</b>	<b>MOTHERS AS EDUCATIONAL SHOPPERS: WEIGHING UP THE OPTIONS</b> .....	<b>136</b>
6.1	Introduction.....	136
6.2	Bourdieu and school shopping .....	137
6.3	The relationship of taste and style to 'field', 'habitus' and 'capital' .....	139
6.4	Evaluating options: Step Two .....	145
6.4.1	When the field has changed: Lily's story.....	147
6.5	Determining Preferences: Step Three .....	151
6.5.1	When the capitals come out to play .....	152
6.6	Conclusion .....	160
<b>7.</b>	<b>MOTHERS AS EDUCATIONAL SHOPPERS: SELECTING THE GOODS</b> .....	<b>163</b>
7.1	Introduction.....	163
7.2	School shopping: Head or heart work? .....	165
7.3	School shopping: Emotional labour and emotional capital.....	167
7.4	Investigating procedures: Step Four.....	174
7.4.1	Managing emotions: When policy impacts at home .....	175
7.4.2	'Acting' calm versus being calm: Jade's story .....	179
7.5	Taking action: Step Five .....	183
7.5.1	Taking action collectively: Daphne's story.....	183
7.5.2	Activating family values. Managing disharmony: Poppy's story... ..	185
7.5.3	Activating family values. Managing harmony: Peony's story.....	189
7.6	Conclusion .....	193

<b>8.</b>	<b>MOTHERS, CHOICE AND FAMILY MATTERS .....</b>	<b>195</b>
8.1	Introduction .....	195
8.2	Understanding the neoliberal economic framing of educational policies... ..	196
8.3	Theorising choice .....	198
8.4	Activating choice .....	201
8.5	Choosing or being chosen?: Step 6 .....	203
8.5.1	Who (really) gets to choose?: Lines of demarcation and exclusion.....	204
8.5.2	Who (really) gets to choose?: Family dynamics .....	210
8.5.3	Choice as investment .....	216
8.6	Conclusion .....	219
<b>9.</b>	<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>220</b>
9.1	Introduction.....	220
9.2	The process of school shopping .....	221
9.3	Complexities .....	226
9.3.1	Gendered not gender-neutral.....	227
9.3.2	Collaborative not individuated.....	227
9.3.3	Emotional and subjective not ‘rational’ .....	228
9.3.4	Context-specific not context-less .....	229
9.4	Implications.....	234
	<b>REFERENCE LIST .....</b>	<b>237</b>
	<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>252</b>
Appendix A	Recruitment advertising .....	252
Appendix B	Interview One Schedule .....	253
Appendix C	Interview Two Schedule .....	255
Appendix D	Interview Three Schedule .....	257
Appendix E	Demographic details .....	259
Appendix F	Typical week time schedule .....	260
Appendix G	List of Pseudonyms .....	262

## List of Tables and Figures

Table 4.1	Selected individual characteristics .....	93
Table 4.2	Selected familial characteristics .....	95
Table 4.3	Selected SES characteristics .....	97
Table 8.1	School choice outcomes by individual child.....	206
Figure 1.1	The process of school shopping .....	13
Figure 5.1	Steps in the process of school shopping.....	115
Figure 6.1	Steps in the process of school shopping.....	137
Figure 7.1	Steps in the process of school shopping.....	165
Figure 8.1	Steps in the process of school shopping.....	196

## Abstract

There have been substantial changes in the way that families interact with schooling at the point of school choice. These shifts have been brought about by market orientated educational policy changes, and by altered forms and experiences of 'family'. This study explores this changed dynamic by researching how a group of mothers in one urban setting engaged in school choice over a period of fourteen months.

The research set out to investigate the processes, behaviours and influences that mothers took to the task of choosing secondary schooling for their children. In particular it aimed to explore the personal, familial, cultural and social dimensions of this engagement.

These objectives were pursued using feminist and phenomenological frames because these theoretical approaches allowed for a gendered and contextualised analysis of experience. Data was gathered longitudinally through return interviews with 20 women from one socially and culturally diverse local government area in Sydney, Australia. The analysis of data is informed by perspectives on markets and consumerism from the field of cultural studies. Bourdieu's concepts of 'capital', 'habitus' and 'field' were also used along with the feminist concepts of 'emotional labour' and 'emotional capital' to analyse the way that neoliberal market orientated educational policies impacted on this group of middle Australians.

This research shows that the Australian experience of school choice is an emotionally rich, highly context-specific, complex, gendered and cooperative process that contests the prevailing public rhetoric about the operations of markets and of choice. School choice, while not always welcomed by this group of middle Australians, is an overtly gendered activity mostly overseen and undertaken by mothers in gender-specific ways. For these women school choice was an activity that demanded considerable physical and emotional labouring adding significantly to mothers' work in support of their children's education. Further, the research showed how within this new marketised context, the family became the site for the contestation of taste via the negotiation of differing economic, social, cultural and emotional capitals vis a vis the structural imperatives imposed by the market. It showed that for these women and their families in this location, at this time, the promise of 'choice' was a hollow promise indeed.