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PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION VOUCHER SCHEME IN HONG KONG

Abstract

This study seeks to question what impact the intervention of an educational voucher has had on the process of school choice. The context examined in this study is the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme ('Voucher Scheme') in Hong Kong. Using a Straussian grounded theory method, data collected from 40 parent interviews are coded, analysed, and developed into categories. A critical realist perspective is adopted for scrutinising the categories and for making inferences about their properties and relationships. Conceptualisation of these categories and of their properties and relationships formulates a grounded theory of school choice under the intervention of the Voucher Scheme.

The theory generated in this study centres around parents as choosers, with their actions being sensitive to conditions and to contexts. This study finds the sophistication and capacity of parents making school choice decisions to be influenced by these parents' resources and how motivated they are, as causal conditions. The significance of causal conditions is mediated by contextual conditions and by intervening conditions. As illustrated in this study, the most important contextual condition is a family's socioeconomic status. The primary intervening condition at work is the Voucher Scheme. The interactions of these conditions play a significant role in shaping parents' school choice actions and, therefore, in respective outcomes.

Nonetheless, these conditions inform but do not determine school choice decisions; because parents, as social agents, deliberate reflexively and act strategically when choosing kindergartens for their children. This study has found that the Voucher Scheme does not result either in clear-cut implications for the empowerment of parents or in their social segregation. Rather, there are multifaceted

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effects which occur, and these effects vary between parents. Likewise, the Voucher Scheme represents not marketisation per se but the transformation of the market into two distinct segments, of which one segment has become increasingly regulated.

The Impact of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme
on School Choice in Hong Kong

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University of Durham

2013

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

under the supervision of Professor Carl Bagley

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own original research with the supervision of Professor Carl Bagley. This study and the work presented in it have not been published or offered previously in candidature at any other university. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously produced by another author, except where due reference is made.

Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent, and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my father, who is a lifelong learner. He has been the role model and source of encouragement throughout my journey of continuous learning.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to my thesis supervisor, Professor Carl Bagley, who shared with me his wisdom and knowledge and mentored me through the research and thesis writing process. Professor Bagley taught me how to critically review the extensive school choice and voucher literature, and he inspired me to crystallize the logic of data analysis and theory generation.

I extend my gratitude to Professor Philip Woods and Professor Mike Fleming, who examined my thesis and sat at the VIVA, and to Dr. Richard Remedios, who provided valuable comments.

I am grateful to the kindergarten principles who offered their generous assistance in recruiting interview participants for me and in providing a venue for the interviews.

I am most indebted to the 40 participants of the interviews. These parents were willing to share with me their experiences and feelings, including many intimate details about themselves and their families. I am grateful for their generosity and their trust in me.

I must give special thanks to my family. My husband, Redmond, is always beside me to provide his unfailing support and to listen to countless renditions of this thesis. My two lovely daughters, Yui Sze and Yui Yee, are diligent and independent in their academic work, freeing me from worries and cheering me on. Thanks to Yui Sze and her friends who helped me with transcription of interviews.

Finally, I feel so blessed to be surrounded by many loving people who have helped me and great friends who have encouraged me in this journey.

Chapter One: Introduction

This introductory Chapter consists of four main parts: the background of the research problem, the research problem and questions, significance of the study, and the structure of the study.

The background of the research problem section describes the key features of the Pre-primary Voucher Scheme (the ‘Voucher Scheme’) in Hong Kong so as to provide the context for the research. Then, the section which follows presents the research problem and outlines the scope of the study. In addition, it sets out the specific research questions for investigation.

In the section describing the study’s significance, I argue that the context of the Voucher Scheme is unique and that, as such, the study adds to the body of knowledge regarding vouchers and school choice. Moreover, the study is significant because of the grounded theory approach with a critical realist perspective that I adopt: This has not been applied to the study of school choice before. Finally, I conclude the chapter with the structure of the study expounded.

Background of the Research Problem

In the 2007/08 school year, Hong Kong launched the Voucher Scheme. It was the first time in history that the Hong Kong Government had subsidised early childhood education substantially. Under the Voucher Scheme, all children aged between 3 and 6 years old and enrolled in a kindergarten were eligible to receive education vouchers subsidising their tuition fees. During the first four years of the scheme, a part of the voucher value redeemed by parents was rendered to kindergartens and spent on teacher development instead of on tuition fees for children. Since the fifth year, the full amount of the voucher has been dedicated to

the payment of tuition fees. Details of the voucher value and its designated uses are set out in Table 1.

Table 1

Voucher Value

School year	Voucher amounts (in HK\$ per annum)		
	Total voucher value	Allocated for tuition fee subsidy	Allocated for teacher development
2007/08	13,000	10,000	3,000
2008/09	14,000	11,000	3,000
2009/10	14,000	12,000	2,000
2010/11	16,000	14,000	1,000
2011/12	16,000	16,000	--
2012/13	16,800	16,800	--

Note. From *Education Commission* (2010, p. 18) and EDB (2012c, p. 2).

The Voucher Scheme is universal in the sense that it is open to all children in Hong Kong aged between 3 and 6 years old. The scheme is not targeted at children from families with specific characteristics. For example, it is not restricted to children from low-income families; but it is open to children from families of all socioeconomic backgrounds. From the supply side, however, the Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong is not universal. The scheme is limited to non-profit-making half-day

kindergartens charging tuition fees not more than HK\$24,000 per student per annum and to non-profit-making full-day kindergartens charging tuition fees not more than HK\$48,000 per student per annum. In other words, although all children aged 3 to 6 years old are eligible for vouchers, some lose eligibility for participation in the scheme if their parents choose to send them to for-profit kindergartens or to non-profit-making kindergartens charging tuition fees exceeding the tuition fee ceiling. For-profit kindergartens are referred to as ‘private independent kindergartens’ by the Hong Kong Government (EDB, 2010).

All kindergartens in Hong Kong are privately owned and operated. The sources of funding include tuition fees paid by parents and investments or support from sponsoring private organisations (EDB, 2010). Private independent kindergartens are for profit, and they are generally owned and operated by private firms. Non-profit-making kindergartens are quite often sponsored by religious, charitable, and other not-for-profit community entities. Nevertheless, the reality is more diverse and complex, because for-profit private firms also own and operate some non-profit-making kindergartens. Outside of a 3-year transitional period, all private independent kindergartens, as well as some non-profit-making kindergartens, are excluded from the Voucher Scheme. The Voucher Scheme also excludes kindergartens which do not adopt the local curriculum as defined by the Education Bureau (EDB, 2011; Education & Manpower Bureau, 2006). Furthermore, all participating kindergartens are required to provide the Government with information on their facilities, on their achievements, on the academic qualifications of their principals and teachers, on the number of teachers and students included among their staff, on special features of their curriculum, and on teaching arrangements. The kindergartens are also subject to class inspections by the Government.

Some kindergartens will continue to be excluded from the Voucher Scheme. This will only cease to be the case if all private independent kindergartens convert themselves to non-profit-making kindergartens, if all kindergartens currently charging in excess of the tuition fee ceiling reduce their fees to below the ceiling, and if all kindergartens switch from a non-local curriculum to the local curriculum. Therefore, whereas all children are eligible, some kindergartens are not. In the 2011/12 school year, 751 kindergartens (79.4%) of the 946 kindergartens in Hong Kong were participating in the Voucher Scheme, and 129,151 students (85.5%) of the 157,433 kindergarten students in Hong Kong were receiving vouchers (EDB, 2012a; EDB, 2012b, pp. 46-47).

The introduction of the Voucher Scheme represents a sea change in the financing of early childhood education in Hong Kong and in the choice parents face. Against this background, the research problem and questions are presented next.

The Research Problem and Questions

The research problem of the study is the impact of the Voucher Scheme on pre-primary school choice in Hong Kong. As school choice decisions are made by parents, the study focusses on parents only. Beyond the scope of this study is the Voucher Scheme's impact on other stakeholders such as kindergarten owners, kindergarten management, teachers, students, taxpayers, and government officials. Similarly, these stakeholders' responses are not part of this study.

To investigate the research problem, this study aims at generating a theory to explain the outcome and the intricate dynamic of parents' decision-making processes in exercising their school choice. The Voucher Scheme has the potential to impact on the outcome as well as on the dynamic of the school choice process. The primary focus is to identify and contextualise conditions and behaviours and then to make

sense of how they are related. This allows me to generate a grounded theory to explain how school choice may have been affected after the launch of the Voucher Scheme.

More specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do parents choose kindergartens for their children?
- How does the Voucher Scheme impact on the process of school choice?
- How does the Voucher Scheme impact on parents' school choice outcomes?

Significance of the Study

The context of the Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong is very different from that of voucher plans in other countries, where competition similar to that existing in private schools is brought to predominantly public school systems. In Hong Kong, the Voucher Scheme reduces the degree of privatisation in early childhood education. A substantial amount of early childhood education is funded by taxpayers' money via the Government; it has become public on the basis of the funding source whilst remaining private in terms of the kindergartens' operation and in terms of educational service provision. Furthermore, even when the Government still refrains from directly providing early childhood education by operating public kindergartens, the policy bias embedded in the Voucher Scheme favours non-profit-making kindergartens. As revealed in Chapter Two, past research in other countries has focussed on the issue of increasing privatisation and on public-versus-private-school choice. This study, by investigating the unique Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong, will add to the body of knowledge about education voucher plans and about parental choice. It fills a gap in the literature: A systematic analysis is made of the voucher's impact on a market featuring schools all privately owned and operated, rather than

on public schools, as constitutes the usual context for existing literature in the field of educational vouchers.

This study also has further significance. It adopts a systematic grounded theory approach for generating a grounded theory to explain the generative causal mechanism of school choice by parents and the subsequent outcome of this process subject to Voucher Scheme intervention. Emphasis is placed on theory generation and on provision of an avenue for comprehensively exploring the dynamic school choice process. My research is therefore quite distinct from much other school choice literature reviewed in Chapter Two, which tends to focus primarily on addressing particular drivers or consequences of school choice. This study fills a gap in the school choice literature by putting forward a theory which contextualises and explains systematically how parents exercise school choice rather than looking for general lists of preferences or decision criteria, as is often the case in the literature.

Structure of the Study

The study is presented in five chapters.

Chapter One: Introduction. This introductory chapter provides an overview of the background, of the research problem and questions, and of the study's significance and structure.

Chapter Two: Literature Review. This gives an overview and critique of the literature on school choice, on education markets, and on the more specific use of the education voucher as a key facet in such behavioural processes and institutional settings. In addition, a critical discussion is given of literature covering the ramifications of these theoretical concepts in Hong Kong's context.

Chapter Three: Methodology. This first sets out an introduction to the inquiry paradigm concept and includes my reflections on my ontological and

epistemological positions. Next, the rationales are given for selecting a critical realist perspective, an intensive research design, and a qualitative research approach for the study. The issue of theory generation is then discussed in the light of critical realism. After this, the discussion proceeds to deal with justification for selection of the grounded theory method and, in particular, the Straussian variant of grounded theory. The differences between the Straussian variant and other variants of grounded theory are expounded, and the compatibility of grounded theory and critical realism is evaluated. With that, I move on to deal with the research design, covering forms of data, selection of settings and participants, data collection, and analysis procedures. The chapter then closes by discussing the issues of assessing quality and of reflexivity.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Findings. This core chapter first presents the data analysis findings in an analytical framework adopted from Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). Its use in the study serves to organise systematically the complex relationships between various contexts, conditions, and behaviour so as to provide explanations of school choice under the Voucher Scheme. Properties of these conditions are set out in tables, and parents' strategies in response to the Voucher Scheme are illustrated visually in diagrams. With that, a theory is generated to illuminate the process of school choice under specific conditions. Then, in the final section of the chapter, the findings and the theory generated are compared and contrasted, in a narrative discussion, with the literature. The purpose of the narrative discussion is to enrich the theory with a detailed storyline which supplements the simplified visual abstraction contained in diagrams.

Chapter Five: Conclusions. The final chapter first summarises the findings and implications developed from the study. It then gives some concluding remarks

on the attributes and quality of the theory generated. At the end of the study, I discuss its limitations, and I put forward recommendations for future research.

Summary

This chapter presents an overview of the study by discussing the research background, the research problem and questions, and the structure of the study. I am confident that this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on school choice and on education vouchers. In the next chapter, I examine the literature on school choice and on education vouchers.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

School choice is the nexus of this study. Its outcome and the process itself connect and manifest the interplays of parental preferences and strategies with the respective institutional and public policy backdrops. In this chapter, I present a literature review on school choice, on education markets, on education vouchers, and on the ramifications of these things in Hong Kong's context.

School choice is a generic concept that sheds light on how parents choose schools for their children. Parents may choose a school according to their preferences, but such preferences and the courses of action chosen are socially situated (Burgess, Greaves, & Vignoles, 2011; Kelly, 2007). Besides, the availability and accessibility of choice also depend on what institutional and policy backdrops there are. Hence, the literature on school choice can be broadly separated into two major areas of research. The first area of research aims primarily to investigate parents' orders of preference, their strategies employed in making school choices, and their socioeconomic contexts (Waslander, Pater, & van der Weide, 2010). This is examined in the next section. The second area of research focusses on discussing and evaluating the dynamics and outcomes of various institutional settings and of public policies (Merrifield, 2008, 2009). These settings and policies define for parents the possibilities existing and the accessibility of choice. In the sections that follow, I first critically review the education market literature in general. Then, I examine the workings and implications of the education voucher, which is one form of government intervention in the education market. In the final section of the chapter, I proceed to give a critical account of school choice and voucher literature in the specific context of Hong Kong.

Parental Preferences and School Choice

Central to the matter of school choice is the notion that parents have preferences for different schools and that they adopt strategies to exercise their choices. A review covering a large amount of empirical international research was carried out by Waslander et al. (2010) with interesting findings: Even in the absence of choice programmes or of marketisation, and even with students being expected to attend nearby local public schools, some parents were found to relocate to inside of catchment areas for their preferred public schools; and some parents cheated with home addresses in order to gain access to preferred schools. Waslander et al. (2010) concluded that, when given an option, large numbers of parents exercise school choice according to their preferences. Waslander et al. (2010) also found that the tendency to take up choice options tends to vary. It depends on parents' demographics, on their satisfaction with previous schools, and on their involvement in their children's educations. Citing prior research by others, Waslander et al. (2010) suggested that more affluent and better educated parents are more likely to exercise school choice. Goldring and Phillips (2008), in contrast, found that parental involvement and access to informal social networks were more important predictors of tendencies by parents exercising school choice; dissatisfaction with previous schools, meanwhile, was deemed to be less of a determining factor.

There has been much research designed to identify the preferences of parents in choosing schools for their children. Surveys and in-depth interviews have been conducted to find out which preferences parents express in choosing schools (Maddaus, 1990). Summing up prior research in the United States, Maddaus (1990) examined these studies and summarised, in the following way, factors for parents' school choice preferences:

academic quality (teacher attitudes and competence, curriculum, administrative leadership, academic standards, instructional methods, etc.), school atmosphere (climate, discipline, values, etc.), school size, class size (individual attention), parental involvement, extracurricular activities, physical condition of the building, safety, location (distance from home, transportation arrangements), student characteristics (race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status), neighborhood characteristics, financial cost, before-and-after-school child care arrangements, preschool enrollment, religious instruction, religious training and commitment of staff, prior enrollment by family members or friends, parental employment on school staff, and child's preferences.
(Maddaus, 1990, p. 275)

The above list is a lengthy one. Research usually asks parents to rank their preferences, and some studies have found academic quality to be the highest ranking preference. Maddaus (1990) suggested, however, that it is problematic to conclude that parents focus predominantly on academic quality or, indeed, on any other single factor. He asserted that parents consider many factors simultaneously and that parents have a holistic view which 'encompasses moral, social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of education' (Maddaus, 1990, p. 289).

Despite Maddaus' (1990) scepticism, a large body of school choice research continues to ask that parents express their preferences in interviews or that they rank a set of choice criteria in survey studies (Waslander et al., 2010). Woods, Bagley, and Glatter (1998) identified three core criteria: standard of academic education, proximity to home or convenience for travel, and a child's happiness at school. Also cited were schools' reputations and examination results and attendance of the schools in question by prospective pupils' friends. Denessen, Driessena, and Slegers (2005) found the most important strategy to be quality of education on offer. More frequently cited were the next three factors identified by Denessen et al. (2005); namely school climate or ethos, the attention paid by schools to each child, and order and discipline. Similarly focussed on academic issues, but with a slight

alteration in wording, Taylor (2002) found good learning environment to be the most frequently cited preference by parents. Following very closely were a caring environment, strong policy on discipline, good management, a happy environment, good facilities in school, plenty of resources for students, safety in school, good reputation, and good examination results. An alternative institutional setting existed in Milwaukee, in the United States. Regarding participation in the voucher programme there, Witte (2000, p. 63) listed factors affecting decisions by the parents from Milwaukee. Once again, educational quality was cited as the most important factor. Other factors assumed the following order of importance: teaching approach, discipline, general atmosphere, class size, financial considerations, location of chosen school, frustration with public schools, and other pupils in attendance at the chosen school. The most frequently cited and highest ranked choice factors worldwide, in terms of importance, were found to be quality of education; distance; satisfaction; and, to a lesser extent, school composition (Waslander et al., 2010).

One potential weakness in the work of Woods et al. (1998) is that they asked parents to rank only 3 out of 34 possible choice factors given in a questionnaire. If Maddaus' (1990) suspicions were correct, meaning that parents do have holistic views encompassing many factors carrying similar weight, then the findings in Woods et al. (1998) may not have given a full and accurate picture of parental preferences. Taylor (2002) and Denessen et al. (2005) adopted a different approach: They asked respondents to assign a score, representative of perceived importance, to each factor given in a questionnaire. Use by Taylor (2002) of a Likert scale, where 0 corresponded with *unimportant* and 4 corresponded with *extremely important*, resulted in parents scoring an average of 10 out of 25 factors at 3 or higher; meanwhile, 18 out of 25 on average were scored by parents at 2 or higher. Similarly,

in Denessen et al. (2005), on a Likert scale, with 1 being *not important at all* and 5 being *very important*, 4 of the 17 possible reasons given in the questionnaire received an average score of 4 or higher; and 11 out of 17 reasons received an average score of 3 or higher. None of the 17 reasons had a score lower than 2. These findings may imply that parents have multiple preferences and that it is risky to focus only on the first several factors whilst ignoring others that have almost as much importance.

Another potential weakness of these surveys is that the findings consist of average numbers not duly accounting for the characteristics of the respondents. Woods (1996), however, constructed two subsamples of social groups for separate examination: The first group consisted of professional and middle-class members, and the second group consisted of working-class members. Woods (1996) found the most frequently indicated choice strategy for professional and middle-class parents to be standard of academic education, but children's school preferences were the most frequently indicated choice strategy for working-class parents. Specifically, two thirds of professional and middle-class parents cited standard of academic education as a strategy, whereas only half of working-class parents did so.

Lareau's (2002, 2003) ethnographic research examined other aspects of childrearing by parents: organisation of daily life, language use, and social connections. How parents arrange their children's leisure time can shed light on understanding of parental choice in a setting absent of regulations. Although school choice is subject to many institutional and regulatory constraints, the organisation of leisure time and of extracurricular activities can largely be determined by parents according to their preferences under the constraints of time and family budgets. Like Woods' (1996) findings showing different temperaments between middle-class and

working-class parents in school choice, Lareau (2002, 2003) suggested that middle-class parents and working-class and poor parents revealed different preferences in childrearing. Middle-class parents enrolled their children in many age-specific organised activities as part of a ‘concerted cultivation’ effort by the parents to transmit important life skills to children. Lareau (2002, 2003) contrasted this to a tendency she termed the ‘accomplishment of natural growth’ by the working class and by poor parents. She claimed that working-class and poor parents tend to believe children will grow and thrive with appropriate provision of love, food, and safety. These parents see no need for enrolling their children in organised activities that develop the children’s talents; there are more middle-class parents who believe such activities to be important. Lareau’s (2002, 2003) conclusion is controversial.

Chin and Phillips (2004), also in an ethnographic study, challenged Lareau’s (2002, 2003) emphasis on the different parenting preferences across social classes. They suggested that the difference in organised activity participation was the result of a difference in resources: family income, parental time, and parental knowledge; children’s preferences and temperaments were also believed to play a part. Cheadle and Amato’s (2011) quantitative study achieved findings which lent support to Lareau’s (2002, 2003) claim of concerted cultivation stemming from a class-based cultural logic; but, at the same time, Cheadle and Amato (2011) recognised the role that economic resources play in parents’ abilities to engage in such concerted cultivation.

Most research on parental preferences in school choice has followed the logic of positive reasoning, asking parents why they chose a particular school (Kelly, 2007). A negative-reasoning approach sheds light on areas otherwise overlooked.

Bagley, Woods, and Glatter (2001) investigated parental choice from the perspective of criteria used by parents in rejecting a school. They found that transport and distance, schools' pupils, and school environment were the three most important factors. Other factors included staff, head teachers, ethnic composition, school reputation, and bullying.

Criticising research which attempts to pinpoint a single school choice process, a universal set of preferences, and a standardised pattern of school choice, Saporito and Lareau (1999) argued that parents' decision making and preferences are socially charged. There are, for example, large differences in the school choice process and in preferences across ethnic groups, such as the differences between white parents and African-American parents in the United States. The process also involves more than one step. White families have been found to approach choice in a two-step process. In the first step, schools with large numbers of African-American pupils are eliminated for consideration. White parents were found to avoid 'black' schools even in some cases when these schools have better academic results and lower poverty rates than the schools that white parents ultimately chose for their children. Racial composition is a single, dominant criterion for white parents in the first stage of the decision-making process. After that, parents moved on to a second step in the choice-making process, adopting other criteria to choose between the remaining schools. African-American parents, on the other hand, did not show similar race-based strategies but were instead inclined to choose schools with lower poverty rates.

There has been one criticism of the large body of research that collects data almost solely from retrospective interviews and from surveys of parents having already decided upon and acted upon their school choice strategies; namely that the

parental preferences are treated as exogenous to the inquiry (Bell, 2008). Parents give no account of changes in dynamics over time when reciting their preferences concerning already completed school choices. Bell (2008) performed a longitudinal comparative case study of 36 parents who were interviewed three times in order to capture the situated aspects of reasoning. The study's findings shed light on the subject of parental preferences evolving over time and on the shaping of these preferences by interactions with schools. Bell (2008) rejected the assumption that preferences are stable over time, asserting the following:

Preferences shift during the choice process in response to the messages parents gather from schools about what to expect from their child as well as the resources available at their child's current school. Finally, the rank order of preferences shifts when external forces make certain schools impossible to choose. In short, preferences shift, change, and interact.
(Bell, 2008, pp. 143-144)

Findings from most of the research so far mentioned in this chapter have been based on what parents said about their own behaviour. Nevertheless, there could be other factors worth considering; and parents may have adhered to these but may have preferred not to mention them. Hamilton and Guin (2005) claimed that, although studies have all reported parents citing academic quality as a primary reason for school choice, some reasons which could be seen as less socially desirable might have gone unmentioned. Hamilton and Guin (2005) cited studies, carried out in Minneapolis and Montgomery, which were concerned with parents' actions rather than with what these parents said; the suggestion was that parents sent their children to schools where the children would be part of the racial majority and that the socioeconomic status of school peers was a good predictor of school choice decisions.

Burgess, Greaves, and Vignoles (2009) found that parents did not mention school social composition as an important factor in choosing a school; however, the first preferences on Local Authority application forms of high social- and economic-status parents tended to be schools whose proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals were much lower than at other available schools. To estimate preferences of parents making school choices, Hastings, Kane, and Staiger (2005) used administrative data for all students participating in a large-scale, district-wide public choice plan in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Instead of survey data, the data used by Hastings et al. (2005) concerned actual enrolments, school characteristics, and students' academic and family backgrounds. A mixed-logit, discrete-choice model was employed: This econometric method analysed the data and found that parents valued both home-school proximity and mean test scores. These findings were not dissimilar to other studies. Interestingly, Hastings et al. (2005) furthermore found that parents' preferences for strong academic results increased in line with family income and with students' own academic abilities; however, family income and academic abilities were found to display a negatively correlated relationship with parents' preference for proximity. In other words, parents who had a higher income and whose children demonstrated higher academic ability rejected their neighbourhood schools in favour of schools with stronger academic performances. Similarly, Woods (1996, p. 331) found, using survey data, that professional and middle-class parents' orders of preference tended to rank highly standard of academic education; meanwhile, working-class parents were more often influenced by their children's school preferences and by schools' proximity to home. More recently, research by Burgess et al. (2009) found that, likewise, parents having high socioeconomic status (measured by principal component analysis)

tended to choose schools with higher academic quality, whereas parents with lower socioeconomic status chose schools with poorer academic performances. Such parental behaviour, which is rational for the individual decision maker, collectively contributes to increased social segregation.

The findings illustrate that lower income parents (Hastings et al., 2005), working-class parents (Woods, 1996), and low socioeconomic status parents (Burgess et al., 2009) place less emphasis on academic results. However, budget constraints may have been mistaken for genuine preference. For some families, transportation costs prohibit a choice strategy involving sending children to out-of-community schools with better academic quality; as a result, these parents may not have mentioned academic results as being important in school choice preference (Kelly, 2007). Poorer parents are constrained by geography and tend to choose schools for geographical convenience (Kelly, 2009). Such constrained preference for geographic convenience is a result of parents' negotiations with a more limited family financial budget; of their perceptions about how large a travel distance is realistic; and of their access to social resources providing help with logistics, work schedules, and child care (Waslander et al., 2010). Burgess et al. (2009, p. 11) were aware of the risk of 'resigned acceptance rather than true preference if parents view their truly desired first preference as unfeasible', and tried to mitigate it by asking parents if there were other schools to which they would have liked to apply but where they ultimately did not.

Lower income families are disadvantaged by more than just inability to pay prohibitive transportation costs. It has long been suggested that poorly educated and low-income parents are less aware of choice options and are less able to gather and evaluate information then exercise choice on behalf of their children (Maddaus,

1990; Musset, 2012). Hastings, Van Weelden, and Weinstein (2007) conducted a field experiment in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public School district and found that lower income parents faced higher information costs when they were confronted with complex decisions, including ones like choosing schools for their children. These lower income parents tended to have less emphasised preferences for schools' academic performances than did parents from high-income families. However, when assisted with academic performance information, these low-income parents doubled their emphasis on preference for academic performance. Therefore, the preference was initially highly constrained by parents' deficiencies in acquisition of necessary information.

Parents' preferences, which can be understood together with the socioeconomic settings in which they are situated, need to be located contextually. A large number of sociological studies in education have shown that the school choice preferences of parents from the professional and middle class are significantly different from the corresponding preferences of working-class parents (Ball, 2003; Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1995, 1996; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Woods, 1996). Gewirtz et al. (1995) studied parental choice of secondary schools in three of London's local school districts, and they concluded the following:

First, choice is very directly and powerfully related to social-class differences. Second, choice emerges as a major new factor in maintaining and indeed reinforcing social-class divisions and inequalities. (Gewirtz et al., 1995, p. 55)

Exercising school choice is a demanding task for many parents and is a task requiring resources and knowledge, which are not distributed equally between families. Furthermore, parents' decision-making behavioural processes are informed by their perceptions, by emotions, and by their values; and optimal results are not

always produced. Kelly's (2007, 2010) argument went against the claims of the orthodox choice advocates and the notion of rational choice theory: He argued that parents do not maximise utilities; nor, he said, do they act according to clear criteria, with knowledge of their children's needs, and in response to the options available. Choice inherently involves uncertainty. Therefore, school choice tends to favour professional-class and middle-class parents. Compared to their working-class counterparts, professional-class and middle-class parents are more ready to accept the risks embedded in making school choice. Unlike working-class parents, who can expect their children to maintain the families' social positions by attending public schools, the middle-class parents have to deal with another risk: the risk of social demotion of their children if the children fail to receive a good education (Kelly, 2009). Kelly (2010) utilised Amartya Sen's distinction between the existence of choice and its exercise:

The issue for those from poorer backgrounds is that they rarely exercise choice in an optimal way, so that merely providing more of it does not necessarily result in any benefit.
(Kelly, 2010, p. 320)

In the same way that Kelly (2007, 2010) challenged the rational choice theory and the recognition of the important role of risk, Ben-Porath (2009) tried to explain how parents choose differently by applying to school choice the notion of bounded rationality taken from behavioural economics. He suggested that school choice is affected by contextual factors such as the way in which options are presented, the channelling of information, and the contingent risks and rewards being conjectured:

Choice is bound by the context in which it occurs, and limited by the forms of rationality that the individual can utilise . . . The way choices are presented or framed; assumptions the individual makes about risk and

potential gain; and marginal channel factors that make some options more accessible than others, have a decisive impact on the decision made. (Ben-Porath, 2009, p. 532)

Vincent and Ball (2001, 2006) found, in their survey of middle-class parents, that parents put a significant emotional investment into choosing childcare providers for their children. Whilst there is a market relationship requiring a financial exchange, it has ‘an emotional dimension for parents of having others care for and develop a relationship with their young child’ (Vincent & Ball, 2006, p. 111). Some parents also have a ‘dislike and distrust of too naked an emphasis upon the financial underpinnings’ (Vincent & Ball, 2001, p. 643). There are also emotional reasons for parents valuing some sorts of information more highly than others. Examples of such information are knowledge obtained from social networks, parents’ ‘own emotional response to schools’, ‘an identification with “people like us”’, and ‘a sense of belonging’ (Ball, 2003, p. 162).

Another layer of complexity stems from the fact that school choice concerns children’s welfare not only in the near-term but also in the distant future. Much uncertainty, moreover, surrounds future events. At the same time, school choice is constrained by past decisions, such as choice of residence. ‘Choice has a history within families and also, crucially, it has a future’ (Ball, 2003, p. 163). Parents, to various degrees, tend to consider choosing childcare, including nursery schools, as being part of a longer process of education. Parents plan years ahead by grouping decisions about pre-primary schooling together with decisions concerning residence and housing, which are usually made in the recent past, and also with plans pertaining to school choice for primary schooling in the future (Nechyba, 2000; Vincent & Ball, 2001, 2006). Some parents’ plans extend even further, beyond the transition to the next stage of schooling, to lifelong terms. Long-term planning

requires the ability to assess and to handle ‘risk, uncertainty and fear’ (Ball, 2003, p. 148) about the unknown:

Choice is about getting from the present to a particular class and social location in the future. It is about prediction, imagination and assurance. This is why control is so important and why also risk is ever-present. . . . Middle-class ontologies are founded upon incompleteness, they are about becoming, about the developmental self, about making something for yourself, realizing yourself, realizing your potential. These parents envisage certain sorts of futures for their children. They see themselves as having the responsibility to make these futures possible through their actions and planning in the here and now.
(Ball, 2003, p. 163)

As illustrated in this quote, Ball (2003) has attributed to middle-class parents a desire to plan for their children; this is in stark contrast with working-class parents’ behaviour.

Previous work by Ball et al. (1995) claimed that working-class parents were less able than their middle-class counterparts to defer gratification and to focus on the future development of their children. It was said that working-class parents tended instead to give much higher priority to the happiness of their children at the immediate time of choosing a school. Ball et al. (1995) called this ‘working class short-termism’. On the other hand, Ball (2003) highlighted middle-class parents’ ability to plan for the future and to mobilise and utilise both private and public resources, calling this ‘sophisticated’:

The middle class have always be[en] denoted by an orientation to the future. It is the increased ubiquity and sophistication, and often its technicization, that is remarkable . . . Planning is starting earlier and involves, for some families, the mobilization or buying in of a sophisticated set of preparatory experiences and guidance, as well as making the best possible use of state support and facilities.
(Ball, 2003, p. 165)

Based on the level of sophistication exercised in school choice and based also on socioeconomic background, some scholars have categorised parents into

different types of choosers. Ball et al. (1996) used the taxonomy of disconnected choosers, who are working-class parents; semiskilled choosers, who are from a variety of class backgrounds; and privileged or skilled choosers, who are mainly professional and middle class. Disconnected parents tend to choose based on plant and facilities and on local social network rather than using official public information. Ball and Vincent (1998) called this type of knowledge, from friends and local relations, *grapevine* or *hot* knowledge and called official public information *cold* knowledge. At the other end of the spectrum, privileged or skilled choosers have a strong inclination to choice; a 'marked capacity to engage with and utilise the possibilities of choice' (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 93); and more complex and diverse aspirations, desires, and concerns about the more distant future of their children. Vincent, Braun, and Ball (2010) used an alternative taxonomy in their analysis of how parents in the United Kingdom choose between childcare settings and between schools. Once again, three types of choosers were given: default choosers, community choosers, and willing choosers. Default choosers tend to choose a school nearby. Community choosers also choose nearby schools, but they furthermore attribute their choices to a particular connection with the school. Willing choosers are those inclined to utilise the possibilities of choice by 'collecting information, identifying a desired school and being able to discuss the feasibility of getting a place there' (Vincent et al., 2010, p. 290).

Some criticism has deemed those working-class parents who choose local schools as passive and indiscriminate in making decisions for their children's education. Wilkins (2010a) argued against this criticism. He claimed that community forms an integral part of parents' school choice preferences due to the community's capacity to invoke 'solidarity, association, shared experience, familiarity, closeness,

security, co-operation and connection' (Wilkins, 2010a, pp. 6-7). Choosing a nearby school can be an active decision for working-class parents because of the values they attribute to the local community.

Likewise, middle-class parents may choose a neighbourhood school for civic goodness or for other principles they value. Raveaud and van Zanten (2007) revealed that a small number of middle-class parents with liberal political orientation in London and Paris sent their children to ethnically mixed local schools due to their desire for equality and integration at the collective level. At the same time, nonetheless, these parents adopted various strategies to maintain their cultural advantages for the benefit of their children. Wilkins (2010b) drew on data from interviews with 11 mothers in north London, and he came to a similar conclusion:

Some mothers engage in active processes of negotiating their choice around a multitude of responsibilities, with a principled focus on wanting to sustain some kind of commitment to community or ethnic diversity. But this commitment is often displaced by or supplemented with an uncompromising desire to do the 'best' by the child and his or her future welfare. (Wilkins, 2010b, p. 185)

Wilkins (2010a, 2010b) and Raveaud and van Zanten (2007) contended that, for working-class parents and for some middle-class parents, their choices of neighbouring schools may have denoted, in certain cases, neither a lack of sophistication in planning the future nor emphasis placed on financial considerations. These parents' actions derived from their adherence to other values. This idea challenges Ball et al. (1996) and Ball and Vincent (1998), according to whose taxonomy of choosers, parents favouring nearby schools are labelled as lacking in sophistication. Nevertheless, Stephen Ball himself recognises the importance of values and principles in school choice, and he places 'situated principles' at the centre in a 'heuristic map choice of school' (Ball, 2003, p. 118). In shaping parents'

school choice decisions, these situated principles interact dynamically with cost, policy, locality, risk, family and social network, characteristics of the child, and with parents' experience of schools. The outcome is unlikely to be clear cut. School choice is a complex and dynamic process in which both the sophistication and the values of the parent wield influence, and the final outcome revealed in the parent's actions or stated preferences is heterogeneous and needs to be understood contextually:

While some aspects of the map [of choice of school] may seem straightforward, overall I want to stress the messiness and the difficulties which are involved in plotting the work done by values rather than come to any clear-cut resolution. However, Jordan, Redley and James . . . make the point that in their study it was in the context of choice of school 'that the concept of "putting the family first" was most explicitly deployed'. In effect the various elements of the map are contextual or contingent factors within which, or in relation to which, principles operate. The work done by principles in decision-making varies in terms of possibility or significance accordingly.
(Ball, 2003, p. 117)

In this section, the literature review focusses on the factors influencing individual parents' school choice decision making. In the following section, I examine the education market literature, which provides a theoretical foundation for understanding school choice in the context of large-scale, market-like environments resembling the pre-primary education market in Hong Kong.

Education Markets

The Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong is operating in the context of a territory-wide education market. Although studies in the United States represent a vast body of literature about vouchers, they concern only small-scale, local voucher experiments. Reviewing the United States voucher literature alone will be insufficient to attain a solid theoretical underpinning of the Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong. It is studies of the education reform in the United Kingdom which provide

valuable insights into school choice in the context of large-scale education markets being introduced. Hence, the school choice literature being reviewed in this section is largely drawn from experience in the United Kingdom and is supplemented by findings in European countries. The European experience provides particularly useful information about the issue, in education markets, of segregation by ethnic groups or by religions. I will return later to the voucher literature on the major voucher programmes in the United States and in selective countries.

Before moving on, in a few paragraphs' time, to the discussion of interactive dynamics between school choice and education markets, I first seek to set out the institutional and structural backdrop of the education markets in the United Kingdom. I follow this with a critical account of debates relating to issues arising, mainly concerning segregation. Research interest in school choice and in education markets surged after the enactment of the Education Reform Act 1988 (the '1988 Reform') which introduced more open enrolment and per capita school funding, created grant-maintained schools and technology colleges, and increased the accountability of schools and the amount of information provided to parents (Glatter, Woods, & Bagley, 1997). The open enrolment arrangement changed the allocation from catchment areas and gave parents

the right to express a preference for any schools (even one outside their LEA) and denied schools the right to refuse anyone entry until a planned admission number was reached. Consequently, all publicly funded schools in England and Wales became 'choice' schools, at least in theory. Most of the funding to schools followed students per capita. After 1988 the number of families selecting schools other than their local catchment (neighbourhood) school increased substantially. Where families are denied access to their selected schools (due to over-subscription for example), they have the right to appeal against schools. The number of parents exercising their right to appeal has also risen greatly.
(Gorard & Fitz, 2006, p. 799)

The 1988 Reform has not changed the education system in the United Kingdom to a free market as proposed in neoclassical economics; nor has the reform granted parents complete control over the schools to which they can send their children, as assumed by orthodox education marketisation advocates (Chubb & Moe, 1990, 1997; Friedman & Friedman, 1980, as cited in Gorard & Fitz, 2006). There are many more practical constraints on how parents can choose than are usually conjectured in the theoretical notion of a free market:

There is no one general education market in operation in England. Education markets are localized and need to be analysed and understood in terms of a set of complex dynamics which mediate and contextualize the impact and effects of the Government's policy.
(Gewirtz et al., 1995, p. 3)

Education markets in England and Wales are characterised by substantial government regulations. Glennerster (1991) claimed that the 1988 Reform fell short of the full market solution and is better referred to as a 'quasi-market' because

- (a) No money can escape to the private sector.
- (b) There is no free entry for new providers. Capital expenditure for new places and new schools will have to be approved by the local authority and the central department in Westminster. . . . Spare capacity to expand, in order to meet demand, will be limited. There is really no mechanism to replicate free entry on the one hand, or bankruptcy on the other, to keep the market truly competitive.
- (c) Choice by parents is limited because in the very same Act the Government required all state schools to follow a common curriculum. . . .
- (d) Teachers' salaries, the largest slice of the school budget, are still set on a national scale.
(Glennerster, 1991, pp. 1268-1269)

Besides local contexts and government regulations, producers in the education market are not necessarily maximising profits as assumed in the paradigm of economics. Le Grand (1991) was also dissatisfied with the application of conventional economic taxonomy to the social policy debate about the Thatcher Government's marketisation efforts in the United Kingdom. He claimed that the

education market introduced by the reform would be better termed a ‘quasi-market’ and that it possessed key differences compared to conventional markets, although there is competition for customers (i.e. students) between schools:

They are not necessarily out to maximize their profits; nor are they necessarily privately owned. Precisely what such enterprises will maximize, or can be expected to maximize, is unclear, as is their ownership structure. (Le Grand, 1991, p. 1260)

In a quasi-market, funding is provided by the government. However, the production of the service is not done by a government monopoly but by competing agencies. These agencies can be, but are not necessarily, privately owned (Woods et al., 1998). The education quasi-market’s important features, in contrast to those of public provision, are the choices it gives learners and parents and the competition it allows among providers (Whitty, 2000). Nevertheless, the choice is still highly regulated; the government controls entry, investment, quality of service, and price (Levacic, 1995, as cited in Gordon & Whitty, 1997). In fact, in most cases, the government has control over both price and quantity.

Bagley, Woods, and Glatter (1996) argued that, in the education quasi-market, internal and external barriers limit both competition and schools’ abilities to respond to parental choice. The functioning of the market mechanism was considered by Bagley et al. (1996) to be thus jeopardised. Therefore, in order to strive for the social optimum in education services, government intervention remains an important element in a quasi-market. Marketisation is not for the bringing about of a classical *laissez faire* market but is for the creation of a quasi-market possessing elements of government intervention.

There are some conditions which are necessary for the success of the quasi-market: competition, adequate information, minimum transaction costs,

minimum uncertainty, motivation by financial consideration, and avoidance of 'cream skimming' (Woods et al., 1998). In an effort to further refine the taxonomy of analysing education markets and to enrich the analytical framework with sociological concepts and tools, Woods et al. (1998) coined the term 'public market'. They aimed to deal with the alleged failure by the quasi-market framework to integrate political and social factors. They also wanted to deal with an inadequate analysis of markets that possess strong structural positions and public interest significance. The notion of a public market conceptual framework is a continuum containing both market and public elements. The notion is designed for incorporating into its analysis parental choice, school autonomy, and diversity of provision. In the construct of a public market, the market elements include choice, diversity, competition, demand-driven funding, and self-determination; and the public elements include action of the government, representation through democratic arrangements, and overseeing of public agencies.

Cultural and social reproduction and economic, cultural, and social capitals are examples of thinking tools from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b, 1984, 1986). These tools can be applied to school choice studies in the context of educational quasi-markets in the United Kingdom. Ball et al. (1995, 1996), Ball (2003), and Vincent and Ball (2006) thereby constructed categories of parents as choosers according to parents' behaviours in making school choices. From this, it emerged that the social classes to which parents belonged apparently exercised a strong influence. These authors further contended that middle-class parents know how to work the system better than do working-class parents and that they use their stronger positions in capital to strategically reproduce a social advantage.

Beck (2007), on the other hand, has criticised Bourdieu's influence in educational research, alleging the latter's methods to be reductionist and arbitrary. He disagreed with the theorisation in Ball (2003) about middle-class families' social reproduction strategies through school choice and with Ball's (2003) claim that school choice policies and the education quasi-market work primarily in the interests of middle-class families. Beck (2007) showed scepticism regarding the use of allegedly 'moralistic' vocabulary like 'battleground', 'the brute realities of social inequity', 'the tragedy of class relations', and 'culture of selfishness'; and, as a whole, he rejected Ball's (2003) notion of middle-class parents engaged in 'class struggles to secure positional advantage for their offspring' (Beck, 2007, pp. 38-39). Asserting that Ball (2003) used unrepresentative data but nonetheless made claims pertaining to a set of strategies encompassing the whole of the middle class, Beck (2007) also contended there to be a whole spectrum of intra-class differences of which Ball is unaware and which he has seemingly chosen to ignore. Beck criticised Ball for loose definition of the middle class, characterised in terms of 'imputed class practices' based on 'value-laden theory and its associated presuppositions' (Beck, 2007, p. 43), and he alleged that

Ball appears relatively unconcerned about the issue of the weight of *evidence* which does or does not support his contention that educational markets work to *enhance* the interests of the middle class, as compared with, say, previous social democratic policy contexts.
(Beck, 2007, p. 43)

Ball's (2003) work was one of theorisation rather than of empirical study. Although Ball (2003) said that 'the question as to whether there is more inequality than within previous policy regimes is not a primary concern here' in his book (p. 8), Ball (2003) proceeded, in Chapter 3, to review work by other scholars, and he

concluded that both his theorisation and the literature that he reviewed pointed to increased inequality or segregation from marketisation:

The 'logic of the market', as I interpret it, would suggest more inequality and the great bulk of the research, although not all, does seem to indicate that there is relatively greater inequality in market systems than in the systems that immediately preceded them. . . . That is to say the weight of evidence, of diverse kinds, from various sources and locations, does seem to tip the balance towards the conclusion that inequality is more prevalent in 'post-welfare' education systems.
(Ball, 2003, p. 8)

In his earlier work, Ball (1993) made a similar claim of increased inequality and of social stratification resulting from marketisation of education:

The danger is that we are moving towards a deformed market, marked by class biases, mediated by the endogenous demands of cultural capital and the exogenous effects of social and economic disadvantage. In both the USA and UK there is evidence of and further potential for social stratification and differentiation in the education systems . . . Explanations of difference in the experience of the market may increasingly be oriented towards parents and families (a new form of social pathology) rather than the operation of the market itself. All these elements combine in the reproduction of social and economic inequalities.
(Ball, 1993, p. 17)

Gorard and Fitz (1998, 2000, 2006) and Gorard, Taylor, and Fitz (2003) challenged the notion that, following the 1988 Reform, school choice effected increased segregation between identifiable socioeconomic groups. This notion has been suggested by Ball (1993), by Ambler (1997), and by Gewirtz et al. (1995); and it has been predicted by sociological theories (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992). Gorard and Fitz (1998) undertook a quantitative study of longitudinal data from secondary schools in six areas in South Wales between 1988 and 1997. It was demonstrated that schools being studied in the aforementioned areas saw reduced stratification for free school meal eligibility, used as a proxy of poverty. Gorard and Fitz (2000) applied the same methodology as Gorard and Fitz (1998) on school-level data for state-funded schools in England and Wales between

1989 and 1998. The conclusion was that ‘overall segregation in terms of poverty and special educational need had declined in England and Wales’ (Gorard & Fitz, 2000, p. 116).

The claims of Gorard and Fitz (1998, 2000) stirred up criticism (Gibson & Asthana, 2000; Noden, 2000) and waves of heated debate (Gibson & Asthana, 2002; Goldstein & Noden, 2003; Gorard, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2009; Gorard & Fitz, 2006; Noden, 2002). The essence of the key debates has been about the measurement of segregation. Gorard and Fitz (1998, 2000) and Gorard et al. (2003) constructed a dissimilation index and a segregation index to measure the unevenness of student distribution between schools. These indices ‘measure the proportion of minority group members that would have to change schools for there to be an even distribution of the group across schools’ (Croxford & Paterson, 2006, p. 385). Noden (2000), on the other hand, used indices of exposure or isolation which measured ‘the extent to which members of a minority group are exposed only to each other, and thus isolated from members of its complementary group’ (Croxford & Paterson, 2006, pp. 385-386). Interestingly, Noden (2002, p. 409) admitted that ‘broadly speaking’ the segregation index constructed by Gorard and Fitz (1998, 2000) was ‘on balance preferable’ to the index he proposed. Gorard and Fitz’s (1998, 2000) choice of measuring unevenness versus isolation was lent support by Allen and Vignoles (2007):

Isolation incorporates ideas of both the overall size of the minority group and of the unevenness in its distribution. So we argue because education policy can only influence the latter, unevenness in the distribution of a given minority group between schools is the relevant policy lever for reducing all types of segregation between schools.
(Allen and Vignoles, 2007, p. 648)

Instead of adopting Gorard and Fitz's (1998, 2000) indices, in a subsequent study, Noden, together with another scholar (Goldstein & Noden, 2003), proposed a multilevel modelling approach which showed an increase in social segregation in England's secondary schools from 1994 to 1999. Besides counter-criticising the modelling approach of Goldstein and Noden (2003), Gorard (2004), and Gorard and Fitz (2006) emphasised that the decline in segregation happened mainly between 1989 and 1995, when the 1988 Reform made most impact, and not in the period between 1994 and 1999.

Gorard et al. (2003) asserted that one major problem in many studies has been the assumption that the *status ante* is 'a somewhat ideal one, or at least one that is often preferable to a system based on limited choice' (p. 23). They also said that further problems have arisen from failure to compare the actual degree of premarketisation segregation to the segregation existing after the introduction of marketisation and of increased school choice. Gorard and Fitz (2006) acknowledged that schools in England and Wales were segregated by socioeconomic status, and that they continue to be so, with any decline in segregation being limited and short-lived. Gorard et al. (2003) and Gorard and Fitz (2006) found that social segregation decreased between 1989, the year when the Education Reform Act 1988 was first introduced, and 1995. It was for the first time, in 1995, that all those in compulsory secondary school years were students who had enrolled after the reform. Social segregation subsequently stabilised and then eventually intensified again:

The degree of segregation by poverty in all secondary schools in England declined annually from a high of 35 per cent to around 30 per cent (meaning 30 per cent of children from poor families would have to exchange schools for there to be no segregation by poverty) . . . The pattern of reduced segregation was repeated when we employed other commonly used measures of the socio-economic composition of school populations, such as statements

of special educational need, first language use and ethnicity. It also applied to Wales and all primary schools in England.
(Gorard et al., 2003, pp. 184-185)

In 1995, 1996 and 1997, segregation in England stayed at around 30%. This suggests that the imposition of school choice on a system with the level of segregation found in 1989 led to progressively less segregated schools (in general) as successive cohorts moved from primary to secondary school. Once all of the students in secondary schools had entered since 1989, this trend ceased and the position stabilised. In essence, the impact of choice policies—if that is what it is—was limited and relatively short-lived. Subsequently, from 1998 to 2002, segregation in English schools increased every year to around 33%, after a change of government in 1997, and the introduction of the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act.
(Gorard & Fitz, 2006, p. 801)

Gibson and Asthana (2000) critiqued the measurement of segregation in Gorard and Fitz (1998, 2000) in terms not of index construction but of free school meal eligibility being used as an indicator of families' socioeconomic status. The latter indicator varies depending on the prevailing economic conditions. Instead of using free school meal eligibility, Croxford and Paterson (2006, pp. 400-401) used parents' occupational status and education levels as measures of families' socioeconomic status, and this demonstrated no 'clear upward or downward trends in the period since parental choice legislation was introduced' in the level of segregation, supporting the assertion by Gorard and Fitz (1998, 2000).

Waslander et al. (2010) conducted a literature review aimed at investigating, firstly, market mechanisms in education within a large number of countries and, secondly, the evidence base for these market mechanisms' impacts. Such investigation is a primary objective of the OECD's *Market Mechanisms and Stakeholder Behaviours in Education Systems* project. Concluding that both ethnic and socioeconomic school segregation had increased following the introduction of open enrolment in the United Kingdom, Waslander et al. (2010) cited Reay (2004) and Allen (2007) but not the work of Gorard et al. (2003). Interestingly, Gorard and

Fitz (2006) and the debate about what counts as evidence were mentioned in the study by Waslander et al. (2010), which, however, said nothing about the findings of the former nor about any reasons for failing to take these findings into account when concluding that segregation had increased. This is less than satisfactory. The primary complaint of Gorard and Fitz (2006) is precisely that they claim theirs to be one of the rare large-scale, national, quantitative, evidence-based studies which covers the period and is able to capture the changes in segregation. In spite of this, they say, their study is often ignored by other scholars' citations. The period covered by their data begins before the reform had any impact on school admissions, and it ends after the open enrolment policy had taken full effect in all secondary school years. Allen (2007) compared one snapshot of a 2002/03 cohort of year 9 students in English secondary schools. For this, she used a simulated 'counterfactual' scenario of all students being centrally allocated to a school near their place of residence. Her study found that school choice in English secondary schools tended to increase social and ability segregation in comparison with the simulated scenario of allocation based strictly on proximity. Gorard et al. (2003) were particularly critical about this approach of comparing a real-life school choice situation with an idealised *status ante*. Allen (2007) acknowledged this limitation and remarked the following:

Unfortunately, the simulated proximity allocation used in this study, while insightful in certain respects, is a poor proxy for the real-world experiment for one principal reason: if we abandoned school choice and non-proximity admissions criteria in England today, we would expect some reallocation in the housing market as parents move house to attempt to achieve their desired choice of school.

(Allen, 2007, p. 753)

It would have been desirable for Waslander et al. (2010) to mention both limitations of the simulated *status ante* in Allen (2007) and the contrary findings from Gorard et al. (2003). A more balanced account could thereby be provided of the

debate in the United Kingdom. Coldron, Cripps, and Shipton (2010) also surveyed the school choice and education-quasi-market literature, as did Waslander et al. (2010). In the former instance, a slightly different conclusion emerged. Coldron et al. (2010) suggested that social segregation has long existed in English schools and ‘has not significantly increased nationally since the introduction of a quasi market’ (p. 21). However, they also said that segregation was increased in some densely populated localities like London. Such interpretations seem to constitute an attempt at rejecting the notion of an overall increase in segregation resulting from the introduction of an education quasi-market. At the same time, it is accepted that the quasi-market is unable to mitigate social segregation, which is bound to persist.

Rejecting the idea that ‘parents are not getting what they want’, Coldron et al. (2010, p. 24) urged caution in dealing with ‘explanations of segregation in terms of some deficit, on the part of poorer parents, such as lack of engagement with their child’s education or lack of skill or competence’. They argued that the persistence of segregation in education is not because of flaws in the education market’s functioning but that it results from the contextual factors in which parents situate and position themselves:

Qualitative studies show that parents in all social groups make conscientious and informed choice of school but that the underpinning values of socially distant groups are different.
(Coldron et al., 2010, pp. 24-25)

Ultimately the drivers of segregated schooling are in the fundamental wish of individuals and families to optimise their social position given the resources at their disposal. While this is shared by parents of all backgrounds, existing inequalities in social position and wealth largely determine different approaches to and returns on engagement with choice of school.
(Coldron et al., 2010, p. 32)

Trained economists Bradley and Taylor (2002, 2010) studied the impact of the education quasi-market in terms of both efficiency and distributional

consequences in English secondary schools. This is quite distinct from sociologist scholars' predominant interest in the issue of social segregation. Bradley and Taylor (2002) used a regression analysis of examination results from English secondary school students to demonstrate the effects of the education quasi-market between 1992 and 1999: There was found to have been improvement in overall examination performance and in examination performance of students, after taking into account the influence from the number of staff. At the same time, it was found that social segregation had increased, as schools with 'good' exam results (compared to other schools in the same district) admitted proportionally fewer pupils coming from poor families, whereas those with a comparatively 'poor' exam performance were left increasing numbers of pupils from poor families. In other words, there has been increased efficiency in schools' production of student performance, but there has also been an increase in segregation following the introduction of the quasi-market. Nevertheless, in a subsequent econometric study, Bradley and Taylor (2010) estimated that, between 1992 and 2006, the quasi-market in education contributed to overall improvement in examination performance by between 20% and 25%, and such improvements were significantly higher in schools with students from poorer families and from ethnic minority groups. The relatively large improvement seen in schools with students from disadvantaged families, in spite of increased social segregation, led Bradley and Taylor (2010) to conclude that the distributional consequences of a quasi-market were favourable.

Attempting to explain the decline of social segregation in schooling found in England and Wales from 1989 to 1998, Gorard and Fitz (2000, p. 116) proposed that the 'phenomenon could be due to the breaking of links between housing and local schools caused by the introduction of increased parental choice since the 1980s'.

Taylor and Gorard (2001, p. 1839), using segregation indices, found to be ‘modest but observable’ the relationship of residential differentiation levels with free school meal eligibility, where the former was in terms of unemployment and the latter of school segregation. It was argued that the degree of residential differentiation ‘has continued to be the chief determinant of segregation’ in education (Taylor & Gorard, 2001, p. 1829). The 1988 Reform has, however, mitigated the impact, to a certain extent, and might have contributed to a decline in socioeconomic segregation between schools in the early 1990s. Taylor and Gorard (2001) further suggest that, because the degree of residential differentiation has always been, and continues to be, high in the United Kingdom, segregation in education may rise again:

The School Standards and Framework Act 1998, which advocates a return to the use of catchment areas and distance to school when allocating places in oversubscribed schools, may be leading inadvertently to increased socioeconomic segregation between schools.
(Taylor & Gorard, 2001, p. 1829)

After reviewing literature on the relationship between school choice and housing decisions in the United Kingdom, Croft (2004) recognised “‘selection by mortgage”, that is, the practice of families relocating themselves close to the “best” schools in order to ensure entry’ as being ‘one of the popular discourses around school choice’ in existing research (p. 936). However, he found empirical evidence to be less than robust in supporting this discourse’s claims. Croft (2004) alleged that the ‘importance of schooling has been exaggerated in popular commentaries on residential movement’ (p. 936) and that the literature concerning the relationship between residence and schooling has been inconclusive. In an empirical study of schools in England and Wales, Burgess et al. (2011) found that families of higher socioeconomic status parents lived closer to schools with higher academic scores and wealthier student intakes. Burgess et al. (2011) suggested that school choice is at

least partially determined by parents' abilities to afford residences near to desirable schools. Coldron et al. (2010) recognised the existence of 'a very strong correlation between residential segregation and school segregation' (p. 28), but they argued against the claim of causality between these two variables:

Rather, choice of where to live and choice of school are driven by the same mechanism of individualised hierarchical differentiation broadly correlated with volumes of economic, cultural and social resources.
(Coldron et al., 2010, p. 28)

In Europe, studies have shown that social-group-related factors other than social class influence parental choice of school. Denessen et al. (2005), using data from over 10,000 parents of primary school pupils in the Netherlands, found that some parents gave importance to group-specific reasons including religion, social milieu, and ethnicity. Specifically, Denessen et al. (2005) suggested that self-segregation might be a risk among Muslim migrant parents in the Netherlands. A similar risk of self-segregation by ethnicity was found by Kristen (2008) to be present among Turkish families in primary schools within the German city of Essen. These Turkish families frequently considered only a single school that typically admitted more pupils from families with foreign origins.

Recognising the importance of ethnicity in school choice, Byrne (2009) criticised the school choice literature in the United Kingdom for focussing too much only on the issue of social class and for paying insufficient attention to the issues of ethnicity. Byrne (2009) reviewed the school choice and education market literature in the United Kingdom and found that

Whilst the respondents in research on middle-class schooling choice appear to frequently flag race as a relevant issue, this has not always been picked up by researchers. Whilst the use of Bourdieuan notions of distinction in class *habitus* has been productive in enabling an analysis of the class nature of parental action around schooling, there needs to be more recognition of the intersections between race and class in making up middle-classness in Britain.

This requires a more nuanced understanding of the shifting terrain on which the idea of ‘people like us’ is constructed, as well as attention to where the ‘middle-class’ practices and discourses discovered would be better described as those of the white middle classes.

(Byrne, 2009, p. 438)

It is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate her claim that most researchers in the United Kingdom have failed to pay due attention to the role of ethnicity in school choice. However, there are, in the literature, examples countering her observations. For example, from as early as the time of Gewirtz et al. (1995), ‘race-informed’ school choices have been shown to feature in research findings concerned with school choice:

‘Racially-’ informed choosing is particularly prominent in south Westway LEA, with many white working-class parents rejecting Gorse school because of its high intake of pupils with a South Asian background and some South Asian parents choosing that school because it is regarded as ‘safe’.

(Gewirtz et al., 1995, p. 185)

In a more detailed analysis based on data collected from an English local area, Bagley (1996) found that, even though white parents did not cite ethnicity as an important factor in choosing a secondary school in his quantitative survey data, quite a number of parents during in-depth interviews brought up the consideration of avoiding Asian students as a reason to reject a multiethnic school. The number of interviews was too small for the findings to have been universally conclusive, but Bagley’s research suggests

the existence of white parental beliefs, attitudes and choice informed by ‘race’. As these racialised views exist, so white flight and increased ethnic segregation of schools remain a possibility.

(Bagley, 1996, p. 579)

Waslander et al. (2010) concluded that many studies have revealed school segregation increasing across different choice regimes; included are those from the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden, the

Netherlands, and from Chile. Bunar (2010a, 2010b) suggested that, in Sweden, the introduction of school choice has had an ambiguous or, at best, a minimally discernible impact on segregation. On the other hand, Soderstrom (2010), constructing a dissimilarity index using admission statistics of the City of Stockholm and of 25 surrounding municipalities, asserted that segregation by ability, by ethnicity, and by family socioeconomic background all increased significantly after Sweden introduced an admission reform aimed at reducing segregation by residence.

After exploring school choice and education markets in the context of large scale marketisation, I move on, in the next section, to examine the voucher literature in the United States. I thereby aim to construct a theoretical foundation for understanding the interactive dynamics between school choice and vouchers.

Education Vouchers

Although only approximately 0.1% to 0.3% of school-aged children participated in a publicly funded voucher programme (Jones-Sanpei, 2008, pp. 325-326; Rouse & Barrow, 2009, p. 18), the idea of publicly funded vouchers has entered into widespread policy debate in over 40 states (Neal, 2002), and there has been a large amount of research and discussion on the subject in the United States. Reviewing this large body of literature gives valuable insights into issues about school choice within the context of education systems where vouchers are available.

In the United States, most schools are publicly funded. For the vast majority of children, public schools are assigned based on home address, whilst only a small number of students attend private schools (Merrifield, 2008). There is no national school choice reform like the 1988 Reform in England and Wales. School choice programmes in the United States are limited and decentralised. Hence, there are no

universal education markets of which to speak but only small specific-choice programmes, which are special cases in the general setting of public education. Marketisation of education and school choice enhancement take the forms of various voucher programmes and of some other choice programme types. Therefore, in contrast to their United Kingdom counterparts, scholarly interests in the United States focus more on individual programmes' performances and on these programmes' impacts rather than on general theories of education markets.

The best known and most discussed voucher programmes in the United States are those in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida (Dwyer, 2002; Howell & Peterson, 2006; Moe, 2001; Salisbury, 2003; Witte, 1998, 2000). None of these programmes are universal; rather, they were established for limited numbers of children, from low income families, attending private schools (Howell & Peterson, 2006; Moe, 2001; Witte, 1998, 2000). However, not all voucher programmes target lower income families. Sometimes, as with the Florida programme, vouchers are used as a means for moving students from 'failing' public schools to private schools, regardless of income levels of families which apply (Moe, 2001). Although most relatively large voucher programmes are publicly funded, there are also 78 small private voucher schemes in the United States (Rouse & Barrow, 2009, p. 29).

With research focus lying on individual small programmes, together with the fact that voucher studies in the United States have more often been carried out by economists than by sociologists, the quasi-market and public market approaches to research are not hugely popular. Studies usually apply the conventional market framework in analysing specific voucher programmes. This debate and research mostly focusses on a voucher programme's impact on outcomes: effectiveness in terms of students' academic performance or achievement, efficiency in terms of the

quality and cost of producing education at school, and equity in terms of social segregation levels (Rouse & Barrow, 2009). Additionally, there also exists a strong political, legal, and religious element to the debate. Since 78% of private schools in the United States are religious (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002, pp. 134-137), of which most are Catholic schools, the public funding of private schools via vouchers is alleged to have violated both the federal and the state constitutions: These constitutions prevent states from making laws ‘respecting an establishment of religion.’ Litigations have been brought to federal as well as to state courts against voucher programmes when these programmes included religious schools (Bolick, 2009). This litigious feature is an area of controversy which surrounds education vouchers in the United States and which is unique in comparison with elsewhere.

Concerning the voucher debate, one approach which is particularly popular in the United States deals with liberty, effectiveness, efficiency, and with equity. Economists, political scientists, philosophers, and legal scholars tend to dominate such discussions. In contrast, the education market debate in the United Kingdom is sociologically orientated.

Levin (2002) proposed a framework for evaluating education vouchers, and he based it on four criteria: freedom of choice, productive efficiency, equity, and social cohesion. Freedom of choice refers to parents’ rights to choose schools for their children according to these parents’ values. Productive efficiency refers to ‘the maximization of educational results for any given resource constraint’ (Levin, 2002, p. 162). Levin’s (2002) notion of equity is a notion advocating equality of opportunity. Social cohesion differs from equity, and it focusses on the ‘provision of a common educational experience that will orient all students to grow to adulthood

as full participants in the social, political, and economic institutions of our society' (Levin, 2002, p. 163).

Levin (2002, p. 165) asserted that voucher programmes involved 'trade-offs' among the four criteria. He proposed three design instruments: finance, regulation, and support services. He also emphasised the need to monitor the trade-offs according to society's preferences. Finance referred to the 'overall magnitude of the educational voucher, how it is allocated and whether schools can charge greater tuition than the voucher' (Levin, 2002, p. 163). Regulation referred to 'the eligibility of schools' and to 'other rules that must be adhered to by schools and families' in order to participate in the voucher programme (Levin, 2002, p. 163). Rules may include common curriculum, uniform testing, admission requirements, and lottery to assure fairness. Support services refer to 'publicly provided services designed to increase the effectiveness of the market' (Levin, 2002, p. 164). Information and transportation are two examples cited as support services.

Applying his framework for reviewing empirical evidence from previous research, Levin (2002, p. 167) concluded that little research dealt directly with freedom of choice in connection with vouchers; that modest improvement in student achievement has been found in the cases of voucher students; that no rigorous evidence of increased student stratification from specific voucher plans has been identified; and that some private schools teach the principle of social cohesion just as well as, or even better than, public schools do. Levin (2002) argued that evaluating a specific voucher programme necessitated determining the relative importance of priorities by gauging communities' preferences. Levin (2009) remarked that prior research in the United States had not found voucher schools to be better than public schools as far as productive efficiency for teaching students. However, the ability to

choose a school suiting children's needs was found to be a dimension favouring choice.

Levin and Schwartz (2007) evaluated the voucher-like Georgia Pre-Kindergarten programme, and they found that the programme had lower costs and equal or superior educational outcomes compared with the government-run Head Start preschool centres. The authors suggested that, in terms of the four criteria put forward by Levin (2002), the Georgia Pre-Kindergarten programme was likely to have been superior to preschool services provided by the government.

Studying the academic outcomes of the government-funded Milwaukee voucher programme, Witte (2000) found that, in reading and mathematics, no achievement-related benefits could be attributed to the voucher programme. Similarly, Howell, Wolf, Peterson, and Campbell (2006) evaluated student performance in the privately funded voucher programmes in New York, in Dayton, and in Washington, D.C.; there was found to be no significant general improvement of test scores overall, except for in one specific ethnic group for each municipal.

McEwan (2000, p. 103) attempted to assess other scholars' claims that 'vouchers will result in a more efficient production of academic achievement and attainment without skewing the distribution of benefits among social groups.' He asked three questions:

- 1) Are private schools more efficient than public schools?
- 2) Does the increasingly competitive schooling market promoted by vouchers cause public schools to become more efficient?
- 3) Do vouchers result in increased student sorting across public and private schools—perhaps increasing segregation by socioeconomic status—and what does sorting portend for student outcomes?

(McEwan, 2000, p. 103)

In his theoretical deliberation, McEwan employed a utilitarian approach. He used a demand and supply model to analyse the construction of market equilibrium

and the changes resulting from the introduction of vouchers. He then considered the empirical evidence from recent experimental research as well as from non-experimental research on the impact of vouchers. The experimental research consisted of pilot voucher programmes in New York City; in Dayton, Ohio; and in Washington, D.C. These pilot studies administered randomly selected groups of low-income families being offered the opportunity to apply for vouchers but not forced to utilise their vouchers. The aforementioned groups were compared with other randomly controlled groups. The non-experimental research covered studies on the experience of the Milwaukee Voucher Plan, offering vouchers to a limited number of low-income families, and some other research also compared student attainment in US private schools to that in US public schools. These private-versus-public-school studies have not directly investigated any voucher programmes.

To synthesise, McEwan (2000) concluded that results have suggested modest gains in mathematics achievement for poor, minority students in elementary schools. However, the findings for secondary students are statistically insignificant and inconsistent. Cost effectiveness findings roughly favour private schools but not without some methodological drawbacks, and there is inconclusiveness regarding the impact by voucher programmes. Effects of competition on public school efficiency are limited. It has been found that parents with higher levels of parental education and involvement are the first to take up enlarged opportunities for choice. The findings support critics' worries of cream skimming. In other words, selection might mean a decline in the achievements of students who remain in public schools under a voucher programme.

Greene (2001a, 2001b, 2005), Greene and Forster (2002), and Greene and Winters (2006) argued that, by increasing competitive pressure on public schools, voucher programmes improve the performance of public schools and therefore also improve the attainment by students that stay in these schools. Nevertheless, some other economists' models and findings doubt the effectiveness of vouchers in enhancing student achievement and support the idea that there is a cream skimming effect.

Ladd (2002) challenged Greene's (2001a, 2001b) findings from a study of the Florida system. Comparing data with that from other states, such as North Carolina, which rank schools according to student achievement as Florida does, student performances have seen similar improvements, even in the absence of voucher programmes. Ladd suggested that the improvement of 'failing' public schools came not from vouchers but from the effect of being ranked: Shame and increased scrutiny motivate schools to do better. It may not have been the voucher programme that helped.

Epple and Romano (1998) developed a computational model to simulate the impact of vouchers. They suggested that vouchers could have significant distributional effects favouring able students from poor families but working against less able students from poor families. Schools may compete for able students. The able students from poor families will move, with the help of vouchers, to better schools, leaving behind the less able peers, who lose the positive peer-group effect from their more able schoolmates.

Whilst recognising the potential for voucher-induced cream skimming of able students and resources from the public school system, Nechyba (2009) proposed that cream skimming practice could be reduced by requiring voucher-accepting private

schools to accept assignments of students through the same mechanism as that employed by public schools. To avoid cream skimming, Musset (2012) and OECD (2012) recommended standardised criteria for admission, for timing of registration, and for tuition fees as well as provision of additional financial incentives to schools for enrolling disadvantaged students. For example, higher voucher values can be used to offset the higher costs associated with educating disadvantaged students in order to reduce socioeconomic and racial segregation. Nonetheless, in order to gauge the relevant implications for the United States, Ladd and Fiske (2009) drew on the Dutch experience of providing more funding to schools for enrolling disadvantaged students; it was shown that the Dutch weighted-student-funding scheme had succeeded in bringing more funding to schools with higher concentrations of disadvantaged students, but it had failed to reduce social segregation at schools. The financial benefits would result in a negligible gain to schools, once offset against the higher costs of educating disadvantaged students who represent more of a challenge to teach, and the 'middle class schools would pay a price in the form of a diminished reputation' (Ladd & Fiske, 2009, p. 14).

The voucher efficacy debate in the United States is handicapped by the small sizes of the programmes. The largest publicly funded voucher programmes include the one in Florida, which has only about 20,000 recipients of vouchers; the programme in Milwaukee, which has about 15,000 recipients; and Cleveland's programme, which has about 6,000 recipients (Figlio, 2009). As, until several years ago, there were no standardised test scores collected for voucher recipients, meaningful empirical research on educational outcomes can be found only in Milwaukee and Cleveland. Figlio (2009) synthesized prior research and claimed that the voucher had brought about at least a modest improvement in Milwaukee

recipients' mathematics results. Some corresponding improvements were also seen in Cleveland recipients' language scores but with a negative impact seen on mathematics.

Rouse and Barrow (2009) reviewed empirical research in the United States investigating the impact of vouchers on student achievement. They concluded that

the best research to date finds relatively small achievement gains for students offered education vouchers, most of which are not statistically different from zero. Furthermore, what little evidence exists regarding the potential for public schools to respond to increased competitive pressure generated by vouchers suggests that one should remain wary that large improvements would result from a more comprehensive voucher system. The evidence from other forms of school choice is also consistent with this conclusion. (Rouse & Barrow, 2009, p. 17)

Going beyond voucher programmes, Miron, Evergreen, and Urschel (2008) examined and summarised 87 empirical studies on voucher programmes, on home schooling, on magnet school programmes, and on charter schools in the United States. They also found a mixed and inclusive picture of the impact by school choice on student achievement.

Wolf (2008), however, criticised the way in which much research suffers from selection bias resulting from the differences in parental motivation associated with the taking up of vouchers. Some studies use a cross-sectional approach to control socioeconomic background in order to eliminate selection bias. Other studies adopt a longitudinal approach using matching techniques to control for selection bias. Wolf (2008) doubted whether statistical modelling in cross-sectional analysis could approximate the necessary conditions appropriately. Although he considered longitudinal studies to do a better job than cross-sectional ones at controlling selection bias, he asserted that the longitudinal approach still could not remove all selection bias from unmeasured factors throughout the life of a study. Wolf

considered a random-assignment experimental design to be the only method that completely eliminates selection bias and thereby produces reliable findings.

Debate over the effects of vouchers would be incomplete without analysing the impact of vouchers' values. Goldhaber (2009) found that the monetary value of vouchers in United States programmes was usually less than the average spending per pupil in public schools. In Milwaukee, for example, a voucher's value is only half the level of per-pupil spending in public schools. The small magnitude of vouchers supports the productive efficiency argument in vouchers' favour, because they allow private schools to produce similar or better educational outcomes with lower costs. The size of the voucher is also likely to determine the kinds of private schools for which students can use the vouchers (Nechyba, 2009). With voucher amounts being significantly below per-pupil-funding levels of public schools, students have fewer private schools to choose between, and the public schools face less significant competition (Nechyba, 2009).

Concerning the trade-off between parents' right to freedom of choice and the state's right to social cohesion, Godwin and Kemerer (2002, pp. 65-97) set out a comprehensive discussion of the relevant political theories. They put the trade-offs into perspective by setting out the continuum of ideas: From the classical liberals John Locke and John Stuart Mill, who consider education to be largely the domain of parents; through the theory of justice advocated by John Rawls and by various contemporary liberals; to the argument of the communitarians, such as Michael Walzer and Benjamin Barber, who argue against private schools. Weissberg (2009) asserted that Milton Friedman's chief argument for school choice was the libertarian notion of personal freedom for its own sake, but he considered this to be independent from the matter of whether or not choice actually uplifts laggard students and

schools. Proponents of voucher programmes assert that choice has not reduced social cohesion. In empirical studies, Campbell (2006, 2008) found that, compared to students in other schools, students in private schools did more community service, had more political tolerance, and were better trained in civic skills. Greene (2005) called the worry about loss of democratic value a ‘myth’, in opposition to which he produced a literature review.

Also taking a normative perspective, Brighouse (2000) listed the philosophical arguments for and against school choice. He refuted the libertarian principle of the desirability of individual choice exercised by parents over their children’s educations, and he argued for ‘[the principle that] all children should have a real opportunity to become autonomous and the principle that all children should have an equal education’ (Brighouse, 2000, p. 64). Nevertheless, he did not reject the idea of school choice but put forward a proposal to design regulated school choice programmes that promote the principles of autonomy facilitation and equal education.

Progressive voucher programmes and targeted voucher programmes, which favour lower income families, were thought to be potentially highly equitable by Brighouse (2008), who thought that universal voucher programmes, meanwhile, tend to be inequitable in theory. Brighouse (2008) further asserted that a system becomes more inequitable if schools have greater student selection powers and if an important role is played by residence in the allocation of places. On a similar note, Levin (2009) proposed that the Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. voucher programmes, which serve only low-income families, may contribute to equity in the community. Moreover, Kelly (2009) suggested that

there may be a case for a new, more widespread use of voucher schemes for low-income families, like those in operation in the US. There they are predominantly used by non-white families whose children are doing poorly

in the public school system, and by the children of better-educated single mothers who understand the benefits of education as a means of escaping the poverty trap.
(Kelly, 2009, pp. 94-95)

In the United States, the public school system is characterised by a significant level of segregation according to income and ethnicity, the basis being parents' ability to choose residences with higher local-government spending on schools.

Nechyba (2009) called the public schools in the United States *quasi-public schools* and the public school system a *quasi-public system*, because housing markets ration access to public schools which are not subject to tuition fees. The system

places school choice into an economic environment in which differences in public school quality arise for two reasons. First, to the extent to which funding for public schools is decentralised and involves local tax sources (such as a local property tax), substantial differences in per pupil funding can emerge across public schools. Second, the self-selection of households into different housing markets can result in substantial differences of non-financial input across public schools—differences that are directly linked to parental income since school quality differences are captured in housing prices.
(Nechyba, 2009, p. 292)

Voucher programmes targeted at low-income families may reduce segregation by giving children from low-income families choices beyond their local quasi-public schools. Vouchers which target all students residing in low-income neighbourhoods can also reduce segregation by removing incentives for parents to pay inflated housing prices so as to get their children into good quasi-public schools; instead, parents can stay in, or relocate to, low-income districts which have education vouchers based on locality (Nechyba, 2009).

Godwin and Kemerer (2002) found that the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Cleveland voucher programmes had not increased socioeconomic or ethnic segregation, because these programmes are limited to low-income students. For the same reason, most small, private voucher programmes have not been found to

increase ethnic or income segregation. In a privately funded voucher programme in San Antonio, Texas, Godwin and Kemerer (2002) examined the differences between choosing and non-choosing students and between choosing and non-choosing students' families. The conclusion was that the low-income, less educated families were less likely to apply for the first-come-first-served vouchers and that the voucher programme could therefore be considered to be contributing to segregation by income and ethnicity. Metcalf and Legan (2002) synthesised the view of those in the United States who have criticised vouchers on the basis of segregation:

Additional speculation focuses on the segregation that vouchers might cause as like-minded families with similar abilities congregate in the same schools. Opponents suggest that vouchers would cause a 'brain drain' from public schools, as the most involved families and most academically talented students transfer into private schools. Opponents further worry that vouchers would lead to increased racial, cultural, religious, and economic segregation, as families with sufficient means and motivation move their children to the school of their choice. Meanwhile, children from the less-informed or less-motivated families would remain in their neighbourhood public schools. (Metcalf & Legan, 2002, pp. 27-28)

The debate has not yet been settled, and the proponents of vouchers have argued their case. Forster (2006) claimed that many studies, in failing to look at individual schools, have incorrectly measured the racial composition of larger administrative units such as school districts or school systems. He summarised the findings from empirical studies that have been deemed methodologically sound, and he concluded that private schools participating in voucher programmes in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. were less segregated than were public schools. Likewise, Greene (2005) asserted, based on evidence from a study on the Milwaukee programme and from his own study of the Cleveland programme, that

vouchers have promoted racial integration because voucher recipients attend better integrated schools than do their public-school counterparts. (Greene, 2005, p. 213)

The voucher debate in the United States is a rich source of information and analysis, and this is highly valuable for understanding other voucher programmes in general. The existing body of research sheds light on the impact of vouchers amid a broad range of individual and societal interests and preferences. Before moving on to Hong Kong's literature, I briefly look at the other voucher experiences worldwide. Internationally, Denmark and the Netherlands have a long history in universal education vouchers since 1814 and 1917, whilst Sweden has a fast-growing and increasingly extensive programme (Barrera-Osorio & Patrinos, 2009; Carnoy, 1998; Hepburn, 1999; McEwan & Carnoy, 2000; West, 1997). Among developing countries, Chile is the only one having a universal voucher programme. Colombia is another developing country which has implemented an extensive private-school voucher programme. The Colombian programme targets students from low-income families. Barrera-Osorio and Patrinos (2009) reviewed research on these major voucher programmes, together with that on voucher programmes in some other countries, and their review provided a summative discussion of educational outcomes. Based on research which randomly assigns vouchers to recipients and to control group students, it can be concluded that vouchers tend to bring about improvements in academic performance. Targeted schemes are found to be particularly effective in improving poorer students' learning outcomes. However, for universal schemes where randomised studies have not been feasible, findings have been mixed. It is unclear how effective schemes have been in Chile and Denmark, whereas greater competition through vouchers has been found to improve educational outcomes in Sweden and in the Netherlands.

The Hong Kong Context

In Hong Kong, when the Voucher Scheme was first announced in 2006, the selective eligibility of kindergartens incurred most debate (Forestier & Clem, 2006; P. L. Lam, 2006; Lee, 2006; Lee & Tong, 2006; Sung, 2006; Tong, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Wardlaw, 2006). Selective eligibility refers to the rule that students attending for-profit kindergartens, as well as non-profit-making kindergartens with tuition fees above the ceiling imposed by the Voucher Scheme, are ineligible to redeem vouchers. American economist and Nobel Prize-laureate Milton Friedman (1955, 1962), who is widely credited with the invention of the notion of education vouchers, said the limits imposed would curtail competition (as cited in Forestier & Clem, 2006). Local commentators in Hong Kong voiced similar concerns about whether the Voucher Scheme's selective eligibility could potentially reduce the diversity of parental choice (P. L. Lam, 2006; Lee, 2006; Sung, 2006). As stakeholders, for-profit kindergartens protested strongly about being excluded. Government officials criticised the quality of some for-profit kindergartens, and they rejected any justification for funding for-profit kindergartens. Ultimately, the Government agreed to allow a 3-year transition period. During this time, for-profit kindergartens charging tuition fees below the Voucher-Scheme-imposed ceiling were to convert into non-profit-making kindergartens (Tong, 2006b, 2006c; Wardlaw, 2006). Some early childhood education academics (Tong, 2006a) have claimed that the Voucher Scheme benefits only parents, but not schools, and that some schools will in fact suffer, because they need to cut fees down to the HK\$24,000 ceiling so as to be eligible for the voucher.

Li, Wong, and Wang (2008) collected views posted online in December 2006, two months after the announcement of the Voucher Scheme, to gather ideas on what

Hong Kong's public thought about the Voucher Scheme. They found a huge degree of disquiet amongst those posting their views on the selective eligibility. It was believed that competition and parental choice would be curtailed. Some suspected the Voucher Scheme's motive of being to 'reign in the privately run' early childhood education sector (Wong & Wang, 2008, p. 59).

Fung and Lam (2009, p. 161) were critical of parents in Hong Kong and claimed them to have overemphasised the importance of 'rote learning of narrowly defined academic skills' for a 'fast track to success'. They thought that the Voucher Scheme would further empower parents to interfere with teachers' professional pedagogical decisions and with the professional mission and vision of kindergartens. Claiming that parents were being given one-sided power, Fung and Lam called for the Government to provide funding support directly to kindergartens instead of giving vouchers to parents. They proposed the Government releasing kindergartens from the need to balance budgets and from the concern of meeting parental expectations.

Yuen (2007), like Fung and Lam (2009), held the opinion that parents possess relatively uninformed ideas as to what constitutes a quality early childhood education. Yuen (2007, 2010) and Tong (2006a), like Fung and Lam later on, was concerned that the Voucher Scheme would lead to commercialisation of early childhood education. Cheng (2009, p. 361) suggested that the Voucher Scheme was a radical change 'away from public provision towards a market-based enterprise society which privileges the rights and freedoms of its parents' and that the scheme was expected to 'operate in a wholly private market'. Ho (2008, p. 224) claimed that the Voucher Scheme increased competition among schools and signified the 'formal recognition of parents' consumer power in the education market'. These claims are

contestable, as the Voucher Scheme has introduced government funding to a market where both funding and service production have previously come from private institutions. The Voucher Scheme has not increased the level of marketisation, and it has even reduced the level of privatisation. Given the increase in governmental and political intervention through funding and given also the tighter regulations having been brought into operation, it can be argued that the school market has moved from one end of the continuum, where it closely resembled a private market, towards the notion of a public market at the other end of the continuum.

In a survey based on data from 380 questionnaires covering 79 kindergartens, Li, Wong, and Wang (2010) investigated the impacts of the Voucher Scheme in terms of early childhood education's affordability to families, in terms of quality education's accessibility to students, and also in terms of the accountability of schools. It was found that the Voucher Scheme contributed to affordability and to accessibility as well as to accountability. It was found that parents were more likely to support the scheme and to perceive more positive impacts than were teachers and principals. Respondents from not-for profit kindergartens were found to be most negatively disposed towards the scheme.

Criticism of Hong Kong's parents contradicts findings by M. Y. H. Lam (1999), by Ho (2008), and by Yuen and Grieshaber (2009), who all suggested a much more comprehensive set of preferences held by Hong Kong parents choosing a kindergarten for their children. M. Y. H. Lam (1999) showed that Hong Kong parents view their children's holistic development as being more important than reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. Meanwhile, Ho (2008) interviewed 17 parents in two kindergartens, and found there were no substantial differences in opinion between the parents and the schools on what they considered to be quality education.

Ho (2008) found that kindergarten parents valued high learning motivation and effectiveness, intimate staff-child relationship, close communication with parents, and total support given to families. Learning motivation and effectiveness were pinpointed as being more important than anything else. High value was placed on close relationships of teachers with pupils. Even close relationships of non-teaching staff members with pupils were also highly valued.

Yuen and Grieshaber (2009) found, in a study of 86 kindergarten parents, that parents valued character and life skills, cognitive abilities and languages, learning of the 'basics', and evidence of pupils that could be considered happy learners. Some parents said that they perceived a dilemma concerning their desire to have their children be happy during pre-primary education. Counterbalancing this, parents feared, on the other hand, insufficiently preparing their children for adjustment to more demanding primary schooling. Curriculum practices were found to be a high priority in school choice, as was the professional suitability of teachers. Parents interviewed did not expect kindergarten teachers to be degree holders. Instead parents sought teachers demonstrating lovingness, positivity, commitment, responsibility, enthusiasm, patience, personability, and friendliness.

As the Voucher Scheme is still relatively new, there is a very limited amount of literature which studies it. Some earlier investigations on the subject of school choice are related to the Direct Subsidy Scheme (Cheung, Randall, & Tam, 2005; Tse, 2008). The Direct Subsidy Scheme ('DSS') was introduced in 1988 to provide private schools with pupil-led funding by the Government. Tse (2008) called it a 'de facto selective add-on voucher'. *Add-on* refers to the fact that DSS schools can charge parents tuition fees in addition to per-pupil funding obtained from the Government. The DSS has become controversial. Aid schools, which are funded by

the Government and do not charge parents for tuition, are encouraged to become DSS schools. Some elite, aided schools have switched, whereupon they have started charging tuition fees. This has raised scepticism and debate, among stakeholders and in the community, about the risk of inducing inequity and social segregation in education (Tse, 2008).

Cheung et al. (2005) have suggested that the tuition fees are mostly modest and have pointed out the number of mandatory scholarships made available to students from low-income families. They did not see great risk from social segregation but found an increase in choice for parents both in theory and, according to their data collected in questionnaires and interviews, in practice. Nonetheless, their empirical data are at risk of selection bias, because all respondents to their survey and interviews have been head teachers of DSS schools. These respondents are stakeholders who are very likely to have benefited from the DSS. No data was gathered from parents.

Based on the literature, on government documents, and on news articles, Tse (2008) suggested that the DSS provides choice to only a selected few well-off families, who can afford to pay, and to some ethnic minority and new immigrant families whose children have difficulties fitting in at local government schools and at aided schools. This de facto selective DSS add-on voucher was considered by Tse (2008) to overall encourage greater inequity and social segregation in education.

Summary

This chapter has provided a review of school choice, of the education market, and of voucher literature. My aim has been to provide a context for investigating the Voucher Scheme's impact on school choice in Hong Kong. Studies related to Hong Kong in these areas of research are sparse, as the Voucher Scheme is still relatively

new. This study will add to the literature about vouchers in the institutional context of Hong Kong.

Studies on school choice have produced a long list of strategies that parents adopt in choosing schools for their children. Among numerous other strategies, academic quality, school climate regarding ethos, cost, attention and care, and home-school proximity are often at the top of this list. Race and socioeconomic status are found to be important determinants in some cases, but parents usually will not spell this out explicitly.

Studies suggest that the school choice decision is a demanding task that requires parents have resources at their disposal and that parents display sophistication in planning for the future. Some contend that these requirements have caused noted differences in school choice strategies between parents from different social classes. Although such a proposition is popular among many education sociologists, emphasis on the role of social class is not without controversy.

Education markets are not free markets but are quasi-markets or public markets: They are embedded with regulations and are shaped by the contextual factors of the stakeholders, including parents, operating around them. A major controversy about school choice, education quasi-markets, and vouchers concerns the matter of whether choice will cause social segregation in education. The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and of subsequent studies, represented by the seminal work of Stephen Ball (2003) and Carol Vincent (with Ball, 2001, 2006), anticipate segregation by class as a result of giving parents more choices in the context of a quasi-market. Empirical evidence, however, is inconclusive, and the debate persists.

Not limiting itself to the questions of inequality and social stratification, the voucher literature in the United States often has broader interests encompassing the

notions of parents' freedom of choice and of productive efficiency in providing education. Scholars have proposed analytical frameworks to gauge and to choose between different preferences of society in designing and evaluating vouchers. Segregation in education and improvement in student performance owing to voucher programmes are issues that are greatly debated but which have not yet been settled.

In Hong Kong, research finds selective eligibility to be most controversial. In addition, there is frequent debate about the implications of the Voucher Scheme for the politics between schools and parents. Through research, the Voucher Scheme has been found to have contributed to schools' affordability and accessibility for parents. It has also contributed to schools' accountability.

My review of relevant existing literature has demonstrated that there remains much to learn about the process of parental school choice and about its outcome. Understanding of these areas can be furthered through useful insights provided by analysis of school choice in the context of Hong Kong's Voucher Scheme. In Chapter Three, I discuss methods used in the course of my study on Hong Kong's Voucher Scheme. Using the literature reviewed in Chapter Two as a backdrop, Chapter Four subsequently undertakes the analysis and discussion of findings from my study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter discusses the research methodology employed in the study. I begin by reflecting on my ontological and epistemological positions as a researcher. I then settle on the perspective of critical realism as a guideline and starting point for selecting a research method (Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). There is no single critical realist research method, and the selection of method relates to ‘the nature of the object studied and to the purpose of the study’ (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 45). The object studied is a process (school choice). The purpose of the study is to generate a theory explaining how agents (parents) react to intervention from an external condition (the Voucher Scheme) and also explaining what the outcomes are.

In the methodological decisions section that follows, it is suggested that a critical realist perspective calls for an intensive research design (Danermark et al., 2002; Sayer, 2010a). After a brief discussion of theory generation, I proceed to introduce qualitative research approaches which are suitable for an intensive research design and for theory generating. I then turn to the selection of grounded theory as the method for analysing data and for theorising. The compatibility between grounded theory and critical realism is evaluated. To address the weakness of grounded theory in making inference, I propose incorporating the critical realist notion of retrodution into the theory-generating process. With these ontological premises, epistemological guiding ideas, and methodological underpinnings, the chapter moves on to the section of methods of data analysis for setting out the selection of settings and participants. It also details data collection and data analysis procedures employed in the study with reference to the version of grounded theory proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

Despite the extended controversy about how to assess quality, especially the notion of validity, in qualitative research (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Seale, 1999), the critical realist position is that quality matters and that it must be addressed in doing research (Maxwell, 2012; Seale, 1999). For assessing quality, the guiding ideas adopted in the study are primarily from Hammersley (1992, 2008), Maxwell (2012), Seale (1999), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), and Corbin and Strauss (1990, 2008). Also included in the section on quality issues are discussions on reflexivity, and on the consideration of ethical issues in research.

Inquiry Paradigm

In denoting a conceptual framework of scientific research, Kuhn (1996) used the term *paradigm* to mean accepted examples of research practice shared by a community of scientists. These examples include ‘law, theory, application and instrumentation’ and together they ‘provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions’ of research (Kuhn, 1996, p. 10). Researchers basing their inquiry on shared paradigms are ‘committed to the same rules and standards’ for practice (Kuhn, 1996, p. 11). In other words, paradigms guide our research practice.

Moreover, a paradigm is a world view and it represents:

a distillation of what we *think* about the world (but cannot prove). Our actions in the world, including actions that we take as inquirers, cannot occur without reference to those paradigms: ‘As we think, so do we act.’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 15)

According to Guba (1990, p. 18), paradigms are ‘the basic belief systems’ which ‘are the starting points’ in determining ‘what inquiry is and how it is to be practised’. He went on to suggest three basic questions which are the starting points of any knowledge inquiry. These questions can be categorised as follows:

- (1) Ontological: What is the nature of the ‘knowable’? Or, what is the nature of ‘reality’?

- (2) Epistemological: What is the nature of the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known (or knowable)?
- (3) Methodological: How should the inquirer go about finding out knowledge? (Guba, 1990, p. 18)

Prior to determining how we might obtain knowledge about the object in question, it is reasonable to presume that we will have formed some ideas or made some assumptions about the nature of the object and about how this object is to be understood. However, researchers do not always acknowledge this presumption. As Hammersley (2007, p. 292) observes, there is the tendency that researchers may simply ‘operate on the basis of exemplar studies and models’ and ‘too cognitivist a conception’ may not explain well the ‘conflicting approaches amongst researchers.’

He continues:

It is not that people first acquire epistemological and ontological assumptions and then decide how they are going to investigate the social world. Rather, they acquire particular research practices and various methodological and philosophical assumptions, consciously and unconsciously, more or less simultaneously, and each shapes the other. . . . So what is involved in paradigm conflict is not simply a clash of ideas about what form of social and educational research ought to take; but, rather, a divergence in *practice*. (Hammersley, 2007, p. 293)

Although I am neither a philosopher by training nor particularly fond of ‘-ism’ and ‘-ist’ words, I am determined to be a reflective researcher. I prefer not to follow exemplar studies and ‘situated practice’ (Hammersley, 2007, p. 293) in the field. I would rather consciously and critically tackle head-on these three philosophical questions of inquiry paradigm: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Collier (1994) notes that:

a good part of the answer to the question ‘why philosophy?’ is that the alternative to philosophy is not *no* philosophy, but *bad* philosophy. The ‘unphilosophical’ person has an unconscious philosophy, which they apply in their practice—whether of science or politics or daily life. . . . This means that philosophy works by making explicit knowledge that is already implicit in some practice or other. Thus Bhaskar can cite Kant approvingly to the effect that it is ‘the function of philosophy to analyse concepts which are

“already given” but “confused”.’
(Collier, 1994, pp. 16-17)

In this section, I develop my answers to the first two questions regarding ontology and epistemology. The third question of methodology will be addressed later, after the object and purpose of the study are given due consideration. It is important to mention that I am reflecting critically on my conception of the world in order to find my own personal answers to ontological and epistemological questions. I have my own personality, values and voice, and I am not subjecting myself to cookie cutters of popular paradigms. It would be artificial for me to pick a paradigm off the shelf from other authoritative sources. Examples of such paradigms would include one of the four alternative inquiry paradigms from the seminal article of Guba and Lincoln (1994) contained in the first edition of *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In determining my beliefs and my conduct, I do not select in advance a paradigm that is positivist, postpositivist, critical theorist, constructivist or participatory (Lincoln et al., 2011); nor do I preordain that I shall be a realist or relativist, an objectivist or a subjectivist, a positivist or a constructivist (Guba, 1990). My reflections on my beliefs, my conduct, and my quest for knowledge are what define my ontological and epistemological premises, together with my continuous and cumulative learning about the philosophy of science and practices in the field. These premises, in turn, position me in relation to established inquiry paradigms so that I am better informed regarding possibilities and so that my worldview is put into analytical perspective.

What is the nature of the world and of reality to me? My answer to this ontological question is that the world is real and that there is a reality existing independently of my own existence and my senses. I reject the notion of multiple

mentally constructed realities in the naturalist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My Christian faith certainly contributes to this belief of a reality independent of human senses and experience. Nonetheless, I am not satisfied with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) claim that ontological decision is a metaphysical belief which cannot be proven or disproven but which can be accepted or rejected at face value. More pragmatically put, I cannot walk on water or avoid making mistakes by living in a mentally constructed reality different from the one in which I am now present. I agree with Danermark et al. (2002) that:

no one can step out of their conceptual world and see if reality 'really exists' or what it 'essentially is', free of conceptual prejudging. And even if we could, we would not understand very much. In everyday practice, the most obvious proof of the autonomous existence of reality is the fact that we can make mistakes. To attempt to 'define one's own reality' and live accordingly may turn out to be very impractical. . . . Reality simply does not react in accordance with our expectations, but on the contrary with considerable autonomy.
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 18)

How am I to know about the reality which exists independently of my experience? What is the nature of the relationship between me, myself, and reality as we know it? I can attempt to understand reality through my interpretation of the observable. Interpretation, and therefore understanding, is contextual, tentative, and fallible. It does not necessarily correspond to reality. In researching the social world, I understand the world through my interpretation of information as an inquirer as well as through the interpretation of my informants. Such interpretation is subjective and dependent on value, on concept, and on theory. My knowledge about the world is therefore dependent on, but not determined by, my senses and understanding. It is important to make a distinction between dependency and determinacy. Value- and theory-laden interpretation influences our conception of the world but not the world itself existing independently of our conception of it. Some of our conceptions,

though still imperfect and fallible, can better reflect the true nature of the world than can other conceptions. Although I adopt an interpretive epistemology, I reject the extreme notion in certain kinds of postmodernism that, since it is impossible to know about the world with absolute certainty, anything goes (Hammersley, 2008, 2009).

Danermark et al. (2002) maintain that:

reality *exists* independently of our knowledge of it. And even if this knowledge is always fallible, yet all knowledge is not equally fallible. It is true that facts are theory-dependent, but this is not to say that they are theory-determined.

(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 17)

My knowledge about the reality existing ‘out there’ is partial, uncertain, and laden with value. However, there is value in attempting, as much as possible, an approach to the nature of reality. This combination of an objective ontology and an interpretive epistemology goes against widely held constructivist positions. According to constructivism, belief in an independently existing reality necessarily constrains research to an objectivist epistemology. An interpretive epistemology, meanwhile, leaves ‘no alternative but to take a position of *relativism*’ and to maintain that ‘realities are multiple and that they exist in people’s mind’ (Guba, 1990, p. 26). The differences between my worldview and the increasingly dominant constructivist and postmodern views (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln et al., 2011) in social sciences research are fundamental. To have a theoretically informed and more in-depth reflection on my worldviews and on their methodological implications, I turn next to critical realism, with which I share standpoints in many areas.

A Critical Realist Perspective

My ontological and epistemological positions are informed by the continuous dialogue about inquiry paradigms in the field of social science research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba, 1990; Hammersley, 2008; Lincoln

& Guba, 1985; Lincoln et al., 2011; Sayer, 2010a; Willis, 2007). In this section, I address the position of my ontology and epistemology in relation to these inquiry paradigms and, in particular, to critical realism. The purpose of adopting a philosophical taxonomy and analytical framework, as Collier (1994) put it:

is not simply a matter of *spelling* out our implicit knowledge, to satisfy our curiosity or our desire for self-knowledge. The work of philosophy can perform two polemical functions in relation to the practices it lights up: a critical one, when it exposes internal contradictions in the beliefs implicit in the practice; and a defensive one, when it shows how the practice does what some (absolutely or relatively) a priori theory claims cannot be done. (Collier, 1994, pp. 17-18)

The paradigmatic perspective I adopt is not a dogma but is a set of guiding ideas. Many of these ideas are from the perspective of critical realism, in a broad sense, including a range of versions of realism (Maxwell, 2012). There are key defining characteristics for this critical realism tradition in ontological and epistemological positions:

Critical realists thus retain an ontological realism (there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories, and constructions) while accepting a form of epistemological constructivism and relativism (our understanding of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoint). (Maxwell, 2012, p. 5)

The critical realist perspective began in the United Kingdom with the work of Roy Bhaskar in the 1970s. Bhaskar (1997, p. 21) maintained that there are two dimensions of knowledge: transitive and intransitive. Theories about the world are transitive objects of knowledge, as they are *about* something. The world that our theories try to explain is intransitive, as it exists independently of theories (Collier, 1994). These two dimensions must be distinguished between, and questions about the nature of the world must not be confused with questions concerning how to obtain knowledge of the world. We otherwise risk committing ‘epistemic fallacy’, as

do many positivists and constructivists, by holding the view that:

statements about being can be reduced or analysed in terms of statements about knowledge; i.e. that ontological questions can always be transposed into epistemological terms. The idea that being can always be analysed in terms of our knowledge of being . . .

(Bhaskar, 1997, p. 36)

Theories, being transitive objects, provide our best approximation to the truth about the world as an intransitive object. However, they can be wrong about their intransitive object (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 36). There can be rival theories at any given time. However, this does not constitute ontological relativism, because all of these rival theories are about the same intransitive object. Collier (1994) remarks that:

rival scientific theories necessarily have different transitive objects, or they would not be different; but they are not about different worlds—otherwise how could they be rivals?

(Collier, 1994, p. 51)

Likewise, ontology must be separated from epistemology. Failure to distinguish between the two dimensions of knowledge and subsequent conflation of ontology and epistemology have induced positivists to commit epistemic fallacy: They insist on finding universal regularities in observable experiences, thinking that ‘if a proposition was not empirically verifiable (or falsifiable) or a tautology, it was meaningless’ (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 37). Unlike positivists, critical realists are not primarily interested in finding universal regularities or all-encompassing laws. Nor do they insist on sense experience or on the ‘empirical world’ as the only source of knowledge, even though both paradigms suggest an objective reality (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 37). For critical realists, ‘the world should not be conflated with our experience of it’ (Sayer, 2000, p. 11).

Critical realism was developed as ‘a comprehensive alternative’ to positivism (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 12). Bhaskar (1997) criticised positivism’s sole focus on

experiences because ‘experiences are often “out of phase” with events’ and ‘real structures exist independently of and are often out of phase with the actual patterns of events’ (1997, p. 13). Bhaskar (1997, p. 56) distinguished three domains of the world: empirical, actual, and real. The empirical domain consists of our experiences. The domain of actual consists both of experiences and of events, which ‘must occur independently of the experiences in which they are apprehended’ (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 56). The domain of real consists of experiences and events, as well as of the mechanisms which are ‘independent of patterns of events and the actions of men alike’ (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 56). The mechanism is ‘the ways of acting of things’ which ‘provide the real basis of causal laws’ (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 14). In critical realism, the explanation of events and of their causation does not depend, as in positivism, on regular successions or repeated occurrences of such events but rather on the interactions between mechanism, structure, and conditions. Sayer (2000) put it thus:

Explanation depends instead on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions. Moving in the other direction, explaining why a certain mechanism exists involves discovering the nature of the structure or object which possesses that mechanism or power.
(Sayer, 2000, p. 14)

Critical realists claim that objects of knowledge are not the phenomena or our construction of such phenomena but are structures and mechanisms. Bhaskar (1997) advanced the notion that:

regards the objects of knowledge as the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena; and the knowledge as produced in the social activity of science. These objects are neither phenomena (empiricism) nor human constructs imposed upon the phenomena (idealism), but real structures which endure and operate independently of our knowledge, our experience and the conditions allow us to access to them. Against empiricism; the objects of knowledge are structures, not events; against idealism, they are intransitive.
(Bhaskar, 1997, p. 25)

Objects of knowledge have ‘certain structures and causal powers’ and

‘whether these powers are ever exercised depends on other conditions’ (Sayer, 2000, pp. 11-14). Objects are part of structures or are sometimes themselves structures (Sayer, 2000). When the causal powers of structures are exercised and their mechanisms are activated under certain conditions, which are other mechanisms, specific events arise (Sayer, 2000). The process demonstrates both the ‘necessity and possibility’ or, in other words, ‘what things must go together, and what could happen given the nature of the objects’ (Sayer, 2000, p. 11). Nevertheless, causal power may or may not be exercised and can result in different events depending on the specifics of conditions. This interactive causation process of structures, mechanisms, conditions and events is contingent. The lack of repeated occurrences and consistent successions of events does not negate the existence of a structure’s causal power and mechanism. On the other hand, the existence of regularities in occurrence of events does not prove any causation. A fundamental implication is that observed regularities in events do not necessarily give us any insights to the underlying structures and mechanisms which cause the events (Maxwell, 2012; Sayer, 2000). Bhaskar (1997) claimed the positivist proposition of the constant conjunction of events to be neither sufficient nor necessary for asserting causation or a scientific law. Instead, to develop explanations for social phenomena in an open system with changing external conditions, it is important to understand deeper dimensions of the underlying structures and mechanism. It is a ‘shift from events to mechanisms’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 40). The critical realist notion of mechanism is interchangeable with the concept of process in social sciences generally (Maxwell, 2012). In this study, I am using the terms mechanism and process synonymously, aiming to engage the critical realist notions with other theoretical frameworks in social science. For example, the term process is central to the method of grounded theory, which will be

discussed later in this chapter.

Another ontological argument of critical realism is that the world is stratified, so we cannot ‘predict a higher-level mechanism from our knowledge of a more basic one’ and the ‘more complex aspects of reality (e.g. life, mind) cannot be reducible to the less complex (e.g. matter)’ (Collier, 1994, p. 110). This is called emergence theory in the sense that the higher level mechanism is ‘rooted in, and emergent from, the more basic one’ (Collier, 1994, p. 110). In studying social phenomena, we need to investigate the structures, mechanisms, conditions, and their relations. We must avoid the temptation of positivism to analyse and present ‘such phenomena as reducible to independent individuals or atoms’ (Sayer, 2000, p. 13). In elaborating the concepts of emergence and irreducibility in connection with social science, Sayer (2000) provided the following explanations:

the world is characterised by emergence, that is situations in which the conjunction of two or more features or aspects gives rise to new phenomena, which have properties which are irreducible to those of their constituents, even though the latter are necessary for their existence.
(Sayer, 2000, p. 12)

In the social world, people’s roles and identities are often internally related, so that what one person or institution is or can do, depends on their relation to others; thus, what it is to be a tutor cannot be explained at the level of individuals but only in terms of their relation to students, and vice versa.
(Sayer, 2000, p. 13)

Sayer (2010a) used water and its constituents as an analogy to warn against the tendency of reductionism found in the practice of researchers:

Many researchers have been seduced by the simple idea that if only individuals and their attitudes, etc. were understood, the macro patterns of society would become intelligible. But it is not always so straightforward. We would not try to explain the power of people to think by reference to the cells that constitute them, as if cells possess this power too. Nor would we explain the power of water to extinguish fire by deriving it from the powers of its constituents, for oxygen and hydrogen are highly inflammable.
(Sayer, 2010a, p. 119)

Ontologically, critical realism also rejects the constructivist and postmodern

ideas of multiple realities, which are situated at the other end of inquiry paradigms, opposite to positivism (Maxwell, 2012). Critical realists argue that ‘a focus on social constructions is insufficient and misleading’ as the emphasis of inquiry shall be on the ‘objective nature of reality’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 40). Critical realism maintains that social research aims at studying the unobservable mechanisms below the surface of observable social phenomena. Therefore, critical realism nowadays ‘is more and more often suggested as a counterweight and alternative to social constructionist ideas’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 39).

Whilst being a contested alternative paradigm to positivism and constructivism, critical realism is ‘still, primarily, a British tradition’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 39) and has been ‘largely unnoticed by most qualitative researchers’ elsewhere (Maxwell, 2012, p. 6). In the introductory chapter of influential publication *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), Denzin and Lincoln (2011) do not include critical realism as one of the theoretical paradigms and perspectives properly considered in their texts and tables. They meanwhile say that critical realism is ‘a third stream between naïve positivism and poststructuralism’, not for them, but ‘for some’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11). Critical realism is simply dismissed by rhetorical statements claiming that it is unable to ‘keep the social science ship afloat’ and ‘is no longer an option’ without due analysis and elaboration (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Likewise, in Lincoln et al.’s (2011) chapter on paradigms and perspectives in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), the term critical realism was used in describing the ontology of postpositivism in tables of paradigm positions, but it was not brought up at all as an inquiry paradigm or as a philosophy of science by itself. Not only was the paradigm of critical realism omitted, but the use of the term to

describe the ontology of postpositivism was also misleading. Ontologically, the postpositivist understanding of reality focusses on regular and probabilistic occurrence of observable events and law-like relationships, falsifiability notwithstanding, such as in the Popper-Hempel explanatory model (Danermark et al., 2002). Critical realist worldviews, however, reject such focus on regularity and on probabilistic explanation. Critical realism instead emphasises the underlying properties, structures, and mechanisms (Danermark et al., 2002). It is incorrect, or at least misleading, to mix up the two notions.

In this section, I have reflected on my worldviews in light of the debate on alternative paradigms in social science research. I have introduced the critical realist perspective as a set of guiding ideas helping to formulate this study. This study neither attempts a comprehensive overview of critical realism nor desires to apply every aspect of the paradigm, which is diverse and covers a wide variety of versions. By no means do I agree with many of the diverse and far-reaching philosophical, ideological, and methodological claims which come under the umbrella of critical realism but are not mentioned here. For example, Bhaskar's philosophy was inspired and greatly influenced by the Marxist tradition (Nielsen, 2002). Although I take some insights from Bhaskar's ontological and epistemological frameworks, I certainly want to emphasise my disagreement with Marxist political economy and with many fundamental aspects of Marxist and Marxian ideologies. Therefore, throughout this study, when I say 'from the critical realist perspective' or 'in critical realism', I refer to specific insights and ideas which come from the critical realist tradition but do not embrace everything that critical realism represents. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, it is counterproductive to squeeze oneself into a philosophical cookie cutter. I aim, rather, to utilise selectively from the literature

some philosophical notions and taxonomies which are proximate to my worldviews. I can thereby organise the ideas I use and can direct my search for a methodology applicable to this specific study. With that, I proceed to address the question of methodology in the following section.

Methodology

In this section, I address the methodological question of how to ‘go about finding out knowledge’ (Guba, 1990, p. 18).

An intensive research design. Since the choice of methods, besides ontological considerations, also depends on the nature of the object being studied and on the purpose of the study (Danermark et al., 2002), the research problem must first be reviewed before the discussion moves on to the research approach and method.

This study is about school choice under a unique school Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong. There was very little written about this subject, and I found no suitable theories addressing this research problem specifically. More fundamentally, school choice is a process which requires in-depth understanding of the action taken by parents in interpreting and reacting to their circumstances. School choice is a decision-making process by parents who have diverse backgrounds, attributes, and motives. Conjectures derived from existing theories will confine the research to predetermined variables and indicators and will ignore a lot of relevant information which I can otherwise discover from the parents. The study’s emphasis is on a contextual understanding of how the process of school choice works but not on extrapolating observed behaviours of parents in the study to attempt a representative account of parents in general. Its purpose is to generate a causal explanation of the Voucher Scheme’s impact, as an external condition, on the school choice mechanism

in context.

Sayer (1984, 2010a) and also Danermark et al. (2002), with some slight modifications, distinguish two kinds of research design in social science: intensive and extensive. Each of the two designs is appropriate for inquiries aiming to answer different types of research questions. In intensive design of social science research, the primary questions concern the following:

How does a process work in a particular case or small number of cases? What produces a certain change? What did the agents actually do?
(Sayer, 2010a, p. 243)

On the other hand, extensive research design is more concerned with ‘discovering some of the common properties and general patterns of a population as a whole’ (Sayer, 2010a, p. 243). These two designs produce different types of account about the objects of knowledge. Intensive research design generates ‘causal explanation of the production of certain objects or events, though not necessarily representative ones’, whilst extensive research design produces ‘descriptive representative generalizations, lacking in explanatory penetration’ (Sayer, 2010a, p. 243). Intensive design of research is therefore more appropriate for studies whose purposes involve ‘causal explanation and interpreting meanings in context’ (Sayer, 2000, p. 21).

The object of the study is school choice, and it is a process with observable consequences. The purpose of my study is to go beyond the observable consequences. I aim to explore and understand the underlying intricate choice mechanism in contextual situations of individual parents with an external intervening condition. An extensive research design looks for regularities, patterns, and features so as to provide representative generalisation. An intensive research design can better handle research questions about understanding processes and mechanisms in situated social settings. This study adopts an intensive research design which can generate

causal explanation about the impact of the Voucher Scheme on school choice within the context of the parents studied. This study is also about theory generation, to which I turn in the following section.

Theory generation. The word *theory* has been given different meanings and has been used in many different ways in different research traditions (Danermark et al., 2002). From a critical realist perspective, theories have the following features:

1. Theory is a language, indispensable to science . . .
2. The theoretical language always includes an interpretation of the social reality. We see and understand the world with the help of theories. Theories here serve as an interpretative framework.
3. Theories are indispensable when it comes to explanation, since they conceptualize causal mechanisms.
4. Theories are abstractions; they describe phenomena with reference to certain aspects, which have been separated from other aspects also characterizing concrete events or phenomena.
5. Theories can be metatheories, normative theories, and also general and more specific descriptive theories. These different types of theory are all of great importance in social scientific research practice.
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 121)

Metatheories are about ‘the foundational assumptions and preconditions of science’ (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 118) such as critical realism, constructivism, and positivism. Normative theories are concerned with the ‘ideas of how something ought to be’ and they can be ‘focusing on moral, political or ideological issues’ (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 118). Descriptive theories aim at describing and characterising ‘fundamental properties, structures, internal relations and mechanisms’ of social phenomena and suggesting ‘how we may interpret and explain’ these phenomena (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 119). Based on the scope of the objects of research, descriptive theories can be distinguished between: Those concerned with specific objects of social phenomena and other more general theories address ‘fundamental aspects of social activity, social interaction and social development processes’ (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 119). An example of specific

descriptive theory would be theories about residential segregation and an example of general descriptive theory would be Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* and forms of capital (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 119).

The kind of theory that this study aims to generate is a descriptive theory about a specific social phenomenon, school choice. This descriptive theory is to conceptualise the causal mechanism of school choice in context. Conceptualisation is the core of theory generation in social science from the perspective of critical realism. This differs fundamentally from the positivist tradition of approaching theories as propositions stating 'conditional relationships among variables that have universal scope' (Hammersley, 1995, p. 57). Sayer (2010a) said the theories of the positivist tradition adopt an ordering framework, which is:

a way of ordering relationship between observations (or data) whose meaning is taken as unproblematic.
(Sayer, 2010a, p. 50)

The development of theories based on observable variables and on predictable relationships between them models natural science (Hammersley, 1995). Theories in social science, however, are about concepts and their relations, which are not natural and predictable but are arbitrary and changeable. Social phenomena are concept dependent and are intrinsically meaningful (Sayer, 2010a). They cannot be reduced to variable analysis (Maxwell, 2012). Concepts refer to objects and to their properties and meanings (Danermark et al., 2002). However, care must be taken to avoid conflating the concept as a human construct and the reality to which the concept refers:

Social theories build upon concepts and relations between concepts. A concept refers to a particular body of thought, to a certain meaning. The concept must be distinguished from the term we use to express this meaning, and from the object or the properties in reality, to which the concept is

supposed to refer.
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 121)

The object to which a concept refers can be mental, physical, or a combination of the two, which are ‘all interacting parts of a single real world’ (Maxwell, 2012, p. 16). Meanings, values, thoughts, and other mental phenomena are not abstractions separate from behaviours; and they are not reducible to measurable neurological and physical variables. They are intertwined in the causal processes in the production of social phenomena (Maxwell, 2012, p. 16). Conceptualisation is abstraction and isolation of physical and mental objects’ fundamental qualities. A theory is conceptualisation, at a higher level of abstraction, of the relations between concepts. A theory involves abstractions of objects or phenomena made by isolating certain aspects of them from other aspects in thought (Danermark et al., 2002). Danermark et al. (2002) remarked the following:

The concepts provide an abstract language enabling us to speak about qualitative properties, structures and mechanisms. The difference between a theory and an individual concept is that the former conceptualizes the relations between several central concepts in a rigorous and reasoned fashion. . . . Social theories are abstractions, crystallizing the necessary conditions for social structures to be what they are.
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 120)

Unlike the positivist paradigm and other empiricist-oriented research paradigms, theories from the critical-realist perspective do not aim at generalisation in the sense of extrapolating empirical observation to a large population. Theories aim at explaining phenomena through conceptualisation beyond the empirical domain into the domains of actual and real. Generalisation, or getting from particulars to generalities, in a critical realist sense refers to ‘transfactual conditions, to the more or less universal preconditions for an object to be what it is’ (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 77). Sayer (1989) took this standpoint:

Theory is no longer associated with generality in the sense of repeated series of events but with determining the nature of things or structures, discovering which characteristics are necessary consequences of their being those kinds of objects. Generality in the sense of extent of occurrence thus depends upon how common instances of the object are, and upon the circumstances or conditions in which objects exist, these determining whether the causal powers and liabilities of objects are activated, and with what effect. For theory to improve its grasp of these properties requires continual refinements of the way in which objects are conceptualised: thus the hallmark of theory is not the formalisation of regularities in empirical events but conceptual analysis.

(Sayer, 1989, p. 258)

A critical realist perspective maintains that social science should have generalising knowledge claims but have a different definition of generality from the empiricists' (Danermark et al., 2002). This standpoint is contrary to those of many other social science researchers, orientated with interpretivist paradigms, who 'minimise the relevance of generalisation or even deny any intention toward generalisation in qualitative research' (Payne & Williams, 2005, p. 295). The issue of generalisation is elaborated in the following sections, in which I discuss the qualitative research approach and the grounded theory method adopted in this study.

Intensive research design aims at generating theories through conceptualisation of events, mechanisms, and structures. This calls for a qualitative approach in inquiry in order to study individual agents in their causal contexts with analysis of detailed qualitative data (Sayer, 2010a). I next turn to a discussion of my decision to adopt a qualitative research approach.

Qualitative research approach. Although an intensive research design, as defined in the previous section, calls for a qualitative research approach, the latter is not a field of inquiry specifically associated with the former notion. Qualitative research is an approach used by researchers from many different paradigms. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) stated that

qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right. It crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter. A complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions surrounds the term. . . . Any definition of qualitative research must work within this complex historical field. Qualitative research means different things in each of these moments. Nonetheless, an initial, generic definition can be offered. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.
(Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3)

The critical realist perspective is compatible with this popular generic definition and with embedded interpretivist epistemology put forward by scholars, such as Denzin and Lincoln (2011), from another paradigm. It does not require a separate definition of its own. A qualitative research approach is suitable for intensive research design, because this approach focusses on particular events or processes in their natural contexts; the particular significations of cases are in their contexts (Danermark et al., 2002). It is often argued that qualitative approach can help researchers to better study social issues in depth and that it can detail and capture complexity due to being unconstrained by predetermined categories of analysis and data in highly structured forms (Hammersley, 2008; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) explains that

qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, require the use of standardized measures so that the varying perspectives and experiences of people can be fit into a limited number of predetermined response categories. . . . The advantage of a quantitative approach is that it's possible to measure the reactions of a great many people to a limited set of questions, thus facilitating comparison and statistical aggregation of the data. This gives a broad, generalizable set of findings presented succinctly and parsimoniously. By

contrast, qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases. This increases the depth of understanding of the cases and situations studied but reduces generalizability.

(Patton, 2002, p. 14)

It is typical, as for Patton (2002), to credit qualitative research with the ability to handle depth and detail, or complexity of the social world, at the expense of generalisability of findings from the research. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that fully capturing the complexity of the social world is impossible, whatever research approach and method might be used. Rather, 'producing knowledge necessarily involves selection and abstraction' (Hammersley, 2008, p. 50). Producing a comprehensible account or theories of reality always requires representations which simplify reality. Besides, in analysing and producing an account, tension arises. On the one hand there is the desire to capture, in all their diversity and complexity, the perspectives of the people studied. On the other hand, there is the need to categorise and employ abstract theoretical concepts, such as segregation, to interpret the phenomena and data (Hammersley, 2008). Hammersley (2008) argued that

qualitative researchers nevertheless engage in processes of theoretical abstraction and data reductions; and that they cannot avoid doing so. In other words, they do not simply render reality, in the sense of capturing and displaying it, but rather they selectively collect and interpret data, formulating what is observed and organising it under categories. While some may wish to portray their approach as naturalistic or phenomenalist, in contrast to the essentialism or reductionism of social theories and quantitative researchers, any kind of *pure* naturalism or phenomenism is impossible. (Hammersley, 2008, p. 44)

Furthermore, appearances or phenomena in the empirical domain are unlikely to help the researchers get a full picture of the social world's complexity.

Researchers need to go deeper to analyse the mechanisms and structures of the object of their study in order to approach appreciating this complexity. Nevertheless, this can still never be fully done. The world is real but not objectively knowable

(Maxwell, 2102). Therefore, although a qualitative research approach is useful and better suited than a quantitative approach to handling research questions about social process, changes, and behaviours, and meanings, the claim that it can capture complexity is sometimes overrated. Nonetheless, fully capturing complexity is unnecessary, as the goal of research is neither to reproduce nor to represent reality in the sense of its likeness (Hammersley, 2008). Instead, ‘the task is always to answer some specific set of questions about it’ (Hammersley, 2008, p. 50).

To attempt to answer questions about the social world, a critical realist perspective brings into qualitative research additional emphasis on causal explanation as well as on understanding. The issue of causal explanation is problematic for many qualitative researchers, and some have denounced the possibility of formulating such explanations:

Other qualitative researchers reacted to the hegemony of the ‘regularity’ approach by denying that causality is a valid concept in the social sciences. A particular influential statement of this position was by Lincoln and Guba (1985), who argued that ‘the concept of causality is so beleaguered and in such serious disarray that it strains credibility to continue to entertain it in any form approximating its present (poorly defined) one’ (p. 141). They later grounded this view in a constructivist stance, stating that ‘there exist multiple, socially constructed realities ungoverned by natural laws, causal or otherwise’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 86), and that “‘causes” and “effects” do not exist except by imputation’.

(Maxwell, 2008, p. 44)

These two reactions to the regularity view were so influential that the 1,000-page second edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000...) had no entries in the index for cause or explanation.

(Maxwell, 2008, p. 169)

There were still no entries for cause, causation, causality, or explanation in the third edition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and the fourth edition of *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), except for brief mention of ‘casual model’, ‘causal narratives’, and ‘programme evaluation and

causation' in Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and of 'causal model' in Denzin and Lincoln (2011).

Approaching causation based on processes or mechanisms and conditions instead of on successive concurrences or regularities, the critical realist paradigm claims that causal explanation is attainable in qualitative research. Moving the focus of the investigative lens from events to mechanisms, as previously discussed in this chapter, finding causal explanations to answer questions about social phenomena remains an important task for social science researchers. It also makes a qualitative approach capable of answering the research question of this study.

In addition, this shift from events and regularity to mechanism and conditions can help defend qualitative research against the criticism and perceived weakness that it is incapable of generalisation. Causation can be identified in single cases or in small numbers of cases through studying the causal process contextually instead of identifying regularities in large numbers. Besides, from the perspective of critical realism, as discussed in a prior section of this chapter, generality does not depend on empirical regularities. Rather, it is a matter of transfactual preconditions for the object to be what it is. It lends powerful support to qualitative research's typical approach of studying a small number of cases in depth and detail.

One of the primary reasons for qualitative researchers choosing to study smaller number of cases in depth and detail, rather than surveying a large population, is their insistence on the importance of contextual nature of social phenomena. Miles and Huberman (1994) noted the following:

Most qualitative researchers believe that a person's behaviour has to be understood in a specific context, and that the context cannot be ignored or 'held constant.' The context can be seen as immediately relevant aspects of the situation (where the person is physically, who else is involved, what the recent history of the contact is, etc.), as well as the relevant aspects of the

social system in which the person appears (a classroom, a school, a department, a company, a family, a hospital ward, a local community). Focusing solely on individual behaviour without attending to contexts runs a serious risk of misunderstanding the meaning of events. (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 102)

Likewise, critical realists maintain that ‘meaning is context-dependent’

(Sayer, 2010a, p. 60) and causal outcomes depend not only on causal mechanisms but also on the contextual conditions of these mechanisms (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This study aims at developing causal explanations about the school choice process. Recognising the importance of context, I emphasise conditions in which parents find themselves when analysing the school choice process and outcomes. The relationships between mechanisms and their effects are not fixed but are contingent, because the effects are mediated by other mechanisms at work in the context (Sayer, 2010a). Pawson and Tilley (1997) illustrated the relationship between mechanism, context, and outcome with the following example:

People’s desires for social advancement are often channelled through the search for educational qualifications. For this strategy to work there needs to be sufficient economic growth to sustain expansion in the desired occupational sectors. If there is a continual race for social enhancement through educational qualification without an equivalent upgrade in occupational destinations, all we end up with is ‘diploma inflation’ and an overqualified workforce. In realist terms, it is the contextual conditioning of causal mechanisms which turns (or fails to turn) causal potential into a causal outcome. (Pawson & Tilley, 1997, p. 69)

Within the realm of qualitative approach, there are a large variety of inquiry strategies or research methods. An attempt to provide a comprehensive review of all these methods goes beyond the scope of this study. In the next section, I build on the above discussion of paradigms, theory generation, and qualitative research approach. This, together with the nature of the object of study and the purpose of the research, constitutes my discussion of grounded theory in the next section. I set out the reasons

for choosing grounded theory as the method for this study and I explain how it works. In addition, I consider some of grounded theory's limitations. Besides this, I attempt to try out the application of some critical realist methodological guidelines and interference modes to complement the working of grounded theory.

Grounded theory method. According to Creswell (2007), there are five major approaches which educational researchers typically choose for conducting qualitative research: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Among them, grounded theory is particularly appropriate for developing theories to explain a process or for providing an abstraction of actions by people and of interactions between people (Creswell, 2007, 2008). Rather than focussing on a particular aspect of human behaviour, social phenomenon, or theoretical content, grounded theory provides guiding principles, steps, and procedures for the process of theory generation in general (Patton, 2002). It is a general method enabling the researcher to generate theories from data through comparative analyses conducted systematically. Data collection and comparative analyses are done simultaneously in an iterative process moving back and forth between the two until theories emerge (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Contradictory to the common misunderstanding that it only concerns qualitative data, grounded theory can use both quantitative and qualitative data in its theory-generating process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory was pioneered by Glaser and Strauss in reaction to the sociological research's then predominant emphasis on verification of 'grand' theory generated by a small number of influential theorists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 10). Such verification is usually carried out with logico-deductive quantitative methods to test grand theories with empirical data. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 2) did not deny

the usefulness of testing theory, which they considered ‘a basic task’, and they considered there to be ‘no conflict between verifying and generating theory’. What Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed was a reorientation of social research; namely a ‘de-emphasis on the prior step of discovering what concepts and hypotheses are relevant’ for the research to an approach with theory generation and verification going hand in hand (p. 2). This is likely to have been a result of Barney G. Glaser’s positivist heritage from his time at Columbia University under the guidance of Robert K. Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Here, I look at theory generated in grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) attempted to close the gap between grand theory and empirical research. As mentioned in the paragraph above, Glaser and Strauss (1967) were dissatisfied with the then prevailing focus on testing grand theory. They were spearheading an effort to improve social scientists’ capacities for generating theory that *will* be relevant to their research’ (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, pp. vii-viii). Glaser and Strauss meant to generate theories, relevant to empirical research, that fell between the ‘minor working hypotheses’ of everyday life and the ‘all-inclusive’ grand theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 33).

The quote above delineates a kind of theory which assimilates Merton’s notion of ‘middle-range theory’. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recognised the influence of Merton’s middle-range theory on their work upfront in their preface, and they advocated developing two basic types of theory: substantive and formal (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. vii). Substantive theory is ‘developed for a substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry, such as patient care [or] race relations’, whereas formal theory is ‘developed for a formal or conceptual area of sociological inquiry, such as stigma [or] deviant behaviour’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 32). In Glaser and Strauss’

(1967) view, theories generated from grounded theory consist of

first, conceptual categories and their conceptual properties; second, hypotheses or generalized relations among the categories and their properties. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 35)

Similar to the critical realist perspective of theory discussed, conceptualisation is the nexus of the theory-generation process in grounded theory. Furthermore, Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 32) emphasised that theory is a ‘process’ and an ‘ever-developing entity’. The importance of conceptualisation and theory development is a noticeable diversion of grounded theory from the positivist approach to theory and from Merton’s middle-range theory. The latter also attempts to close the gap between grand theories and empirical research. This is done by verifying theories with empirical data in a deductive model of conditional relations between predetermined variables (Charmaz, 2006; Danermark et al., 2002). Nonetheless, Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser’s subsequent works (1978, 1992, 2008), in particular, divert only in some areas from positivism, and they retain many epistemological premises of positivism (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Heath & Cowley, 2004). In terms of the meaning of theory, Charmaz (2006) noted that Glaser has retained a strong positivist orientation:

Glaser’s ... treatment of theory contains strong positivist leanings. He emphasizes the development of theoretical categories that serve as variables, assumes an indicator-concept approach, seeks context-free but modifiable theoretical statements, and aims for ‘the achievement of parsimony and scope in explanatory power’. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 127)

There is an inherent source of tension in the seminal book by Glaser and Straus (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. This conflict stems from the very different ontological, epistemological, and methodological legacies that the two founders of grounded theory brought along

with them. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss came from two distinctly different inquiry paradigms: positivism and symbolic interactionism respectively (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Heath & Cowley, 2004). Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. vii) acknowledged their epistemological and methodological differences in the first paragraph of the preface in their book and said that they were brought together by ‘ironic conjunction of careers’.

The tension in inquiry paradigms between Glaser and Strauss eventually came to a head in 1990. This was when Anselm Strauss, in collaboration with his student and mentee, Juliet Corbin, published a procedural textbook on grounded theory, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Glaser was greatly upset by this book. After his requests that the book be either recalled or changed were ignored by Strauss, Glaser wrote another book, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* (Glaser, 1992), to denounce Strauss and Corbin (1990) chapter by chapter, point by point. He accused Strauss and Corbin (1990) of misconception of grounded theory as originally developed in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and bemoaned the ‘gross neglect of 90% of its important ideas’ (Glaser, 1992, p. 2). The Glaserian variant of grounded theory was highly influenced by the positivist orientation in ‘Merton’s middle-range theory and Lazarsfeld’s quantitative methodology’ in connection with Glaser’s affiliation with the Department of Sociology at Columbia University (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. vii). In particular, Glaser (2008, p. 1) attributed the ‘idea for a grounded theory methodology’ to Lazarsfeld’s ‘methodology of quantitative studies’ developed in the 1950s, and this methodology is known for its orientation to positivism. In fact, Lazarsfeld is regarded by peer sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu ‘as the central figure in modern social-scientific positivism’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 56).

Glaserian grounded theory is considered to be ‘a type of variable analysis analogous to quantitative manipulation of variables’ (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 35).

In the contributions to his book co-authored with Glaser (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and in his other later texts with Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), Strauss brought to grounded theory the qualitative methodological movement represented by symbolic interactionism and pioneered by Herbert Blumer, a sociologist from the University of Chicago. Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1998) philosophy of pragmatism, meanwhile, was inherited largely from John Dewey and George Mead, both of whom were also scholars at the University of Chicago (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Strauss was a student of Blumer, and Blumer of Mead (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). The philosophical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism were derived from pragmatism (Charmaz, 2006). From the perspective of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism, social behaviour is neither explicable in genetic terms and by logical processes, nor is it programmed by societal norms. Rather, it is considered that ‘individuals engage in a world which requires reflexive interaction as opposed to environmental response’ (Goulding, 2002, p. 39). Corbin and Strauss (2008) quoted Blumer in the introductory chapter of the third edition of the *Basics of Qualitative Research*:

According to Blumer (1969), ‘symbolic interaction’ refers to a particular form of interaction that occurs between persons. He says: The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or ‘define’ each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions. Their ‘response’ is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions (p. 19).

(Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 2)

Likewise, pragmatist philosophers, such as Dewey and Mead, consider that knowledge arises through ‘acting and interaction of self-reflective being’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 2). Social actors are solving problems with uncertainty and are

relying on provisional answers to make judgment 'in terms of further actions (consequences)' in the process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 3). Strauss and Corbin (1990) incorporated these pragmatist and symbolic interactionist notions of action and interaction processes into the analytical framework of grounded theory. The processes of actions by and interactions between individuals are interpretive, contingent, and not deterministic. This contrasts with Glaser's (1978) assimilation of positivist variable analysis in theorising. Straussian grounded theory focusses on the process of actions and interactions, and such a process is set into motion by a change in conditions. Strauss and Corbin (1990) articulated that

grounded theory is an action/interactional oriented method of theory building. Whether one is studying individuals, groups, or collectives, there is action/interaction, which is directed at managing, handling, carrying out, responding to phenomenon as it exists in context or under a specific set of perceived conditions.

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 104)

Bringing process into the analysis is an important part of any grounded theory study. By process we mean the linking of sequences of action/interaction as they pertain to the management of, control over, or response to, a phenomenon. This linking of sequences is accomplished by noting: (a) the change in conditions influencing action/interaction over time; (b) the action/interactional response to that change; (c) the consequences that result from that action/interactional response; and finally by (d) describing how those consequences become part of the conditions influencing the next action/interaction sequence.

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 143)

Since it is a change in conditions that sets process into motion, to understand the mechanics of process revealed by analysis it is necessary to understand something about change.

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 149)

This emphasis on change, on conditions, on process, and on action and interaction has shifted Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) away from the more positivist Glaserian grounded theory. The conditions, actions, and interactions are categories developed in analysis of data. Statements of relations between categories account for the process set off by a change in conditions. These elements constitute

the notion of theory in accordance with Strauss and Corbin (1998), who remarked the following:

What do we mean by *theory*? For us, *theory denotes a set of well-developed categories (e.g. themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing, or other phenomenon. The statements of relationship explain who, what, when, where, why, how and with what consequences an event occurs. Once concepts are related through statements of relationship into an explanatory theoretical framework, the research findings move beyond conceptual ordering to theory.* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 22)

Straussian definition of theory has important common ground with the critical realist notion of theory earlier discussed. In particular, this relates to the rigorous and reasoned emphasis between concepts (Danermark et al., 2002) and to the move beyond a ‘filing system’ style of ‘ordering-framework’ (Sayer, 2010a, p. 50). According to Pratt (1995), grounded theory resonates with critical realism through the emphasis on ‘the development of new theories’, and the ‘concern with conceptualisation and reconceptualisation’ (p. 70). Nonetheless, it is not to say that the two of them are completely assimilable. The Straussian variant of grounded theory has retained a positivist disposition, inherited from the original work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), focussing only on observable properties presented by empirical data. This was particularly obvious in the first edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research*. However, much of this positivist disposition was watered down in the second and third editions, which recognised the increasing importance of researchers’ interpretation of the data. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990),

your final theory is limited to those categories, their properties and dimensions, and statements of relationships that exist in the actual data collected—not what you think might be out there but haven’t come across. We are building grounded theory, and it is the purposeful grounding or verification process that makes this mode of theory building different from many other modes of theory building. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 112)

Grounded theory certainly got its name from the emphasis it places on grounding the process of theory generation in data. The relationships, and therefore the theories, are considered to exist out there in the data, ready to be discovered by researchers. Theories are discovered ‘from data—systematically obtained and analysed’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Critical realism, on the other hand, with its eyes on underlying structures and mechanisms, insists on taking the analysis beyond empirical data to ‘the conceptualisation of objects, both in their observable and unobservable properties’ (Sayer, 2010a, p. 50). Relying on the empirical domain alone is inadequate for gauging the social reality behind the empirical data. Inferences have to be made about the actual and real domain of knowledge (Bhaskar, 2008). I return later in the chapter to discussing the modes of inference in grounded theory, in critical realism, and in this study.

Grounded theory’s insistence on letting data speaking for themselves and on avoiding analysis from theoretic concepts is also considered problematic and is ‘criticised as a sign of naïve inductivism’ by peer researchers (Danermark et al., 2002). Grounded theory focusses on participants’ perspectives and on empirical facts. Due to their assumptions regarding theory-independent data and their belief in objectivity, Glaserian and, to a lesser extent, Straussian variants of grounded theory give insufficient attention to the importance of researchers’ preconceptions and interpretations. Grounded theory lacks interpretive awareness of the value-laden meaning of empirical data and refuses to employ theoretical concepts beyond inspiration. As such, it risks being reduced to common-sense knowledge (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Although common-sense knowledge is valuable, and knowledge admittedly starts from there, it ‘should not *remain* at that level’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 72). Theoretical concepts are needed as ‘the scientific

instruments necessary to find alternatives to common-sense categories' of empirical data (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 136). Moreover, grounding the theory in data may minimise the researcher's preconceptions. By doing so, however, it allows preconceptions, in terms of the people being studied, without proper interpretation informed by theoretical frameworks. Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1991) reminded fellow sociologists

in Poincaré's words, that 'facts do not speak' When the sociologist counts on the facts to supply the problematic and the theoretical concepts that will enable him to construct and analyse the facts, there is always a danger that these will be supplied from the informants' mouths. It is not sufficient for the sociologist to listen to the subjects, faithfully recording their statements and their reasons, in order to account for their conduct and even for the reasons they offer; in doing so, he is liable to replace his own preconceptions with the preconceptions of those whom he studies Many studies of motivations (especially retrospective ones) presuppose that subjects can momentarily possess the objective truth of their behaviour (and that they continuously preserve an adequate memory of it), as if the representation they formed of their decisions or actions owed nothing to retrospective rationalisation. . . . Whenever he believes he can avoid the task of constructing the facts in relation to a theoretical problematic, the sociologist submits himself to a construction of which he is unaware; in extreme cases he will collect nothing more than the fictitious discourses that the subjects devise to cope with the situation of inquiry and to answer artificial questions, or even with the supreme artifice of a lack of questions. (Bourdieu et al., 1991, pp. 37-38)

Facts do not speak, but knowledge does. To become knowledge, facts have to have meaning which is created in 'practices and in the interactive communication between members in a community where language is the principal medium' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 28). As a human construction, knowledge has different meanings to different people and reality has 'parallel conceptual frameworks and different and sometimes competing interpretations' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 29). In social sciences, researchers deal with 'speaking objects' (Bourdieu et al., 1991, p. 37). Both the researchers and the people being researched have the capacity to interpret and create the meanings of objects. When a researcher collects data from

the informant, the data has already been interpreted by the latter. This is the problem of 'double hermeneutic' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 36). Glaserian and the earlier vintages of Straussian variants of grounded theory, in the view of critical realists,

[do] not consider the significance and consequences of the double hermeneutic of social science . . . and the problematic relation between an everyday understanding and scientific abstraction. Concepts describing fundamental social structures and mechanisms will always go beyond, relativize and problematize individuals' everyday experience. (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 137)

The grounded theory method relies too much on the *subject's narrative* of concrete social phenomena. To a certain extent, the grounded theory method postulates that both substantive and formal theories can be generated directly from concrete data, implying that generative mechanisms can also emerge directly from data. But three dangers are associated with this over-reliance on 'direct data' (i.e., data collected directly from actors). First, social actors (including critical realists!) may be trapped in false consciousness, unable to explain truly and to account fully for their action. Quite often, this happens when social actors are constrained and bound by social structures. . . . Secondly, much information on structural context and contingency is not obtainable directly from individual case studies and /or interviews. Sometimes, the researcher must 'elevate' him or herself from the data to get a broader and clearer picture. Thirdly, although casual categories can emerge from the data, relations among these causal categories (i.e., generative mechanisms) cannot be 'read off' straightly [sic] from the data. They must be abstracted in conjunction with substantive theorization and immanent review, subject to a posterior evaluation. In summary, the grounded theory method can potentially complement iterative abstraction in the realist methodology by grounding abstract causal mechanisms in empirical data. We must be cautious, however, in applying the grounded theory method because it may simply lead to another form of empiricism hidden behind a qualitative mask. (Yeung, 1997, p. 63)

In the second edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which was published two years after Strauss had passed away, Strauss and Corbin gave more prominent roles to interpretation and to theoretical concepts, also recognising more pragmatically the impossibility of objectivity, than did the writings of Glaser and Strauss (1967) or of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Strauss and Corbin (1998) introduced the concept of 'microanalysis' which 'involves very careful, often minute examination and interpretation of data' (p. 58). Microanalysis has, according

to Strauss and Corbin (1998),

two aspects: (a) the data, be they participants' recounting of actual events and actions as they are remembered or texts, observations, videos, and the like gathered by the researcher; and (b) the observers' and actors' interpretations of those events, objects, happenings, and actions. There also is a third element: the interplay that takes place between data and researcher in both gathering and analysing data. The interplay, by its very nature, is not entirely objective as some researchers might wish us to believe. Interplay, by its very nature, means a researcher is actively reacting to and working with data. We believe that although a researcher can try to be as objective as possible, in a practical sense, that is not entirely possible. Thus, it is preferable to self-consciously bring disciplinary and research experience into the analysis but to do so in ways that enhance the creative aspects of analysis rather than drive analysis. Experience and knowledge are what sensitizes the researcher to significant problems and issues in the data and allows him or her to see alternative explanations and to recognize properties and dimensions of emergent concepts.

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 58-59)

Furthermore the third edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) included a previously unpublished discussion written, for the second edition and whilst Strauss was still alive, about the pragmatist and symbolic interactionist roots of the two authors. The discussion demonstrated an interpretive epistemology in their variant of grounded theory, and it paid tribute to their pragmatist roots:

What is discovered about 'reality' cannot be divorced from the operative perspective of the knower, which enters silently into his or her search for, and ultimate conclusions about, some event. This Pragmatist position does not at all lead to radical relativism (as currently in one version of postmodernism). Radical relativism reasons that since no version or interpretation can be proven, therefore no certainty about any given one can be assumed. Instead the Pragmatists, like any practicing scientist in their day or ours, must make a couple of key assumptions. One is that truth is equivalent to 'for the time being this is what we know—but eventually it may be judged partly or even wholly wrong.'

(Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 4)

Reality, in the view of pragmatists, is 'not out there' to be discovered 'but rather continually in the making on the part of active beings' (Strubing, 2007, p. 583). It is an 'objective reality of perspectives'. When people construct meanings of reality

through actions, these actions involve ‘choices based on (known or unknown) preconceptions’ (Strubing, 2007, p. 584). Strubing (2007) claimed that pragmatism

defines reality as being made by and experienced only through human activity. Concisely: reality is nowhere else but in active experience, i.e. in action. . . . As an initial clarification: neither is it denied that a certain ‘something out there’ might exist independently of social actor(s), nor do pragmatists claim reality-in-action to be an idealistic concept of a reality existing, produced, and manipulated exclusively in cerebral form. For pragmatists any possible ‘something out there’ can rather be likened to an undefined openness, experienced as specific kinds of obduracy requiring active dealing with for the solution of practical problems. . . . Pragmatists stress that not only are things meaningless if they are not acted upon, but moreover that in the absence of (inter)action they cease to have an existence for us at all as being.
(Strubing, 2007, p. 583)

The influence of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, and these perspectives’ interpretive epistemology on Straussian grounded theory, however, has varied among the latter’s formulations across time. Researchers who are dissatisfied with positivist and objectivist leanings in Glaserian grounded theory find the Straussian variant possibly to be heading in the right direction but also to be insufficient. Charmaz (2005) claimed that

Strauss’s version of grounded theory emphasized meaning, action, and process, consistent with his intellectual roots in pragmatism and symbolic interactionism . . . Like Glaser, Strauss and Corbin also advanced positivistic procedures, although different ones. They introduced new technical procedures and made verification an explicit goal, thus bringing grounded theory closer to positivist ideals. In divergent ways, Strauss and Corbin’s works as well as Glaser’s treatises draw upon objectivist assumptions founded in positivism.
(Charmaz, 2005, p. 509)

Kathy Charmaz and some other researchers attempted to bring grounded theory back to the core tenets of pragmatism and to develop it ‘as a social constructionist method’ (Charmaz, 2005, p. 509). Charmaz chose a moderate version of constructivism (Hildenbrand, 2007) and a ‘middle ground between realist and postmodernist visions’ (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 51). Charmaz (2006) presented

a moderate constructivist view which

assumes an obdurate, yet ever-changing world but recognizes diverse local worlds and multiple realities, and addresses how people's actions affect their local and larger worlds. Thus, those who take a constructivist approach aim to show the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 132)

Likewise, the moderate constructivist view expressed by Bryant and Charmaz (2007)

moves further into interpretive conceptual frames and further away from deterministic variables. . . . seeks to recognize partial knowledge, multiple perspectives, diverse positions, uncertainties, and variation in both empirical experience and its theoretical rendering. It is realist to the extent that the researcher strives to represent the studied phenomena as faithfully as possible, representing the 'realities' of those in the studied situation in all their diversity and complexity. (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 51)

Charmaz's attempt to develop a constructivist grounded theory method is characteristic of her emphasis on participants' perspectives. However, as the long quote from Pierre Bourdieu et al. (1991) earlier in this chapter indicates, doing so may simply replace the preconceptions of the researchers uncritically with those of the participants. Strubing (2007) argued that Charmaz and Bryant's constructivist formulation of grounded theory added nothing new to grounded theory except for the 'nominalistic undercurrent that characterizes constructivist approaches' (Strubing, 2007, p. 598). He also disagreed with Charmaz's (2006) labelling of Strauss and Corbin's works as objective grounded theory. He thought their position was clearly a pragmatist one and that what should be done was to return the Straussian variant of grounded theory to its pragmatist roots.

Corbin has taken the shift in ontology and epistemology further in recent years and has admitted to being 'influenced to some degree by the writings of contemporary feminists, constructionists, and postmodernists' and moving towards 'interpretive methods more deeply into the regions of postmodern sensibility' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 9). This is another reason why I refrain from using the

term *Strauss and Corbin's variant* in favour of *Straussian variant* throughout the discussion in this study, thereby avoiding confusion.

In this study, I employ primarily the Straussian variant of grounded theory as presented in Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). In a similar way to my own worldview and inquiry paradigm, the Straussian variant of grounded theory has a realist ontology and interpretive epistemology. Its approaches to theory generation, based on studying relations between categories and their properties and dimensions systematically, are compatible with the critical realist notion of theory. Although the latter's emphasis on the underlying mechanism and structure is missing in the former, the Straussian variant is more epistemologically sound, from a critical realist perspective, than the Glaserian variable analysis.

Ending this section, a final note concerns expounding the reason for drawing on critical realism rather than following Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) in adopting symbolic interactionism to guide research practice. Symbolic interactionism's basic premises, as defined by Blumer (1969), cited in Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds (1975), are as follows:

First, human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Secondly, their meanings are a product of social interaction in human society. Thirdly, these meanings are modified and handled through an interpretive process that is used by each individual in dealing with the things he/she encounters.
(Meltzer et al., 1975, p. 1)

Symbolic interactionist researchers tend to focus on gauging the process of interpretation, by which individuals construct their meanings, actions, and interactions; and these researchers are less interested in finding causal explanations (Hammersley, 1989; Partington, 1998). Donmoyer (1990) noted that Blumer, a leading symbolic interactionist, 'refuses to phrase research findings in terms of

cause-and-effect generalisations, even probabilistic ones' (p. 181). Without attempting to make casual explanations, symbolic interactionist grounded theories are at risk of generating categories and their descriptions but no theories (Bryman, 1988, cited in Partington, 1998). Critical realism, on the other hand, attempts to develop causal explanation by focussing on the conditions, mechanisms, and structures of phenomena.

Furthermore, symbolic interactionism focusses on individuals and pays insufficient attention to social structures, such as institution, class, and moral structure (Annells, 1996). Meanwhile, critical realism emphasises the importance of social structure, and the understanding and explanation of social phenomena is socially constructed (Parry, 2011). According to critical realism, actions of people are influenced by the social structure, though they are not determined, because there are other contextual conditions and the people's own reflexivity affecting the actions (Archer, 1995, 2000, 2003; Danermark et. al, 2002; Elder-Vass, 2010). A critical realist perspective also facilitates examination of 'the structural roots of contradictions between what is said and unsaid' by the participants during interview so as to better analyse data and make inferences (Oliver, 2012, p. 382).

In the following section, I demonstrate the merit of critical realism's abductive and retroductive inferences working harmoniously with the Straussian variant of grounded theory. I also show how abduction and retroduction add to the grounded theory by being better able to generate plausible theoretical alternatives providing causal explanations.

Modes of inference. As discussed in the previous section, neither reality nor the data speak for themselves. Data by themselves are not knowledge. They must first be interpreted and analysed in order for meanings to arise and for conclusions to

be drawn. Researchers must use their faculty of reasoning to make sense of the data they collect in the process of developing knowledge. In generating theory, researchers must reason to draw conclusions. Danermark et al. (2002) remarked that

reasoning, our ability to analyse, abstract, relate, interpret and draw conclusions, is a fundamental precondition for all knowledge development. (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 79)

The method of forming reasons and of drawing conclusions is called ‘inference’. In grounded theory, the general perception is that inference is an inductive method but that there is more to it than that (Reichertz, 2007). The early formulations of grounded theory, which was devised as a counteracting force to the then prevalent deductive method, emphasised that ‘this is an inductive method of theory development’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 114). By inductive thinking, researchers go from the specific to the general. Danermark et al. (2002) defined induction as being a thought operation

from a number of observations to draw universally valid conclusions about a whole population. To see similarities in a number of observations and draw the conclusion that these similarities also apply to non-studied cases. From observed co-variants to draw conclusions about law-like relations. (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 80)

Data should be allowed to speak for themselves, and the research’s focus should be firmly on an inductive method moving from data to concepts and on to theory. In the view of Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researchers should not do any literature review on the field of the research problem until the theory has already emerged and should not use any predefined theoretical concepts in the constant comparative analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) wrote that

an effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas. Similarities and convergences with the literature can be established

after the analytic core of categories has emerged.
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 37)

With the two founders subsequently going separate ways, this emphasis on induction in grounded theory has changed. Nonetheless, even for Glaser and Strauss (1967), induction is not the only inference mode employed, though it is the predominant one. When abstraction takes place and categories emerge, theoretical concerns arise and need to be verified. This can be addressed by deduction. In the definition given in Danermark et al. (2002), deduction is a thought operation

to derive logically valid conclusions from given premises. To derive knowledge of individual phenomena from universal laws.
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 80)

To verify the relevance of the categories and of the emerging theory, the researcher continually checks them against the data pour in a kind of deductive thinking. However, Glaser and Strauss (1967) did not fail to warn that

generation of theory through comparative analysis both subsumes and assumes verifications and accurate descriptions, but *only* to the extent that the latter are in the service of generation. . . . Accurate description and verification are not so crucial when one's purpose is to generate theory. This is especially true because evidence and testing never destroy a theory (of any generality), they only modify it. A theory's only replacement is a better theory.
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 28)

Glaser has retained the commitment to induction as the key mode of inference, and he has insisted that deduction, being secondary as verification, is a servant of generating theory (Health & Cowley, 2004). Likewise, he stayed true to his objection against reviewing literature until the later stages of analysis, when the theory had emerged (Glaser, 1992). His concern was not about there being anything wrong with the literature, but he did not want any preconceptions and existing theoretical concepts to restrict the possibility of a theorising process based on induction. Glaser (1992) repeated that:

the dictum in grounded theory research is: There is a need not to review any of the literature in the substantive area under study.
(Glaser, 1992, p. 31)

Strauss, however, moved on to an analysis process which gives a much more dominant position to deduction, and he claimed that ‘the original development of grounded theory inductive aspects were overplayed’ (Health & Cowley, 2004, p. 144). Strauss and Corbin (1990) explicitly raised the importance of deduction in the analysis process and of the usefulness that might prove to be associated with some knowledge of the literature prior to starting research. These two changes went hand in hand, because theoretical concepts from the literature are a resource for the researcher when he or she shifts to the approach of deductive thinking during analysis. Strauss and Corbin (1990) stated the following:

As with any aspect of analysis discussed in this book, deductive as well as inductive thinking are both very much a part of the analytic process. For instance, there may be times when the analyst is not able immediately to find evidence of process in the data. Either it’s there, but not recognized as such; or there is insufficient data to bring it out. When this happens, the analyst can turn to deductive thinking and hypothesize possible potential situations of change, then go back to the data or field situation and look for evidence to support, refute, or modify that hypothesis.
(Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 148)

Strauss and Corbin (1990) devoted a whole chapter to illustrating literature’s use in grounded theory research. Although they repeated a very brief warning, in line with Glaser and Strauss (1967), about the risk of being constrained by previously developed theoretical concepts, the bulk of the chapter talked about the usefulness of literature and drew conclusions:

- . . . The technical literature has various uses in grounded theory research . . .
- (1) The literature can be used to stimulate theoretical sensitivity by providing concepts and relationships that are checked out against actual data . . .
 - (2) The literature can be used as secondary sources of data . . .
 - (3) It can stimulate questions. You can use the literature to derive a list of questions that you want to ask of your respondents or that guide your initial observations . . .

- (4) It can direct theoretical sampling. The literature can give ideas about where you might go to uncover phenomena important to the development of your theory . . .
- (5) It can be used as supplementary validation. When you have finished developing your theory and are writing up your findings, you can reference the literature in appropriate places to give validation of the accuracy of your findings. . . .

All kinds of literature can be used before a research study is begun: both in thinking about and getting the study off the ground. They can also be used during the study itself, contributing to its forward thrust.

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 50-56)

In their variant of grounded theory research, Strauss and Corbin (1998) went a step further in tampering with the prominence of inductive thinking by proposing a method ‘moving between induction and deduction’ (p. 136) and giving a key role to theoretical concepts from the researcher’s assumptions from and the literature:

The conception of induction often is applied to qualitative research. Our position on the matter is as follows. Although statements of relationship or hypothesis do evolve from data (we go from the specific case to the general), whenever we conceptualize data or develop hypotheses, we are interpreting to some degree. To us, an interpretation is a form of deduction. We are deducing what is based on data but also based on our readings of that data along with our assumptions about the nature of life, the literature that we carry in our heads, and the discussions that we have with colleagues.

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 136-137)

Induction is reasoning originating in empirical data, developing into abstract concepts, and then, finally, becoming theory. Deduction goes the other way round, moving from theory to operationalised concepts and on to data for testing. Rather than returning to deduction, from which grounded theory originally aimed to depart, there are other alternative modes of inference that can be deployed for data analysis and for theory generation. Some methodologists argued that the Straussian variant of grounded theory in effect employs abduction as an increasingly important mode of inference, instead of sticking only to induction and deduction as suggested by Strauss and Corbin themselves in their writings (Reichert, 2007; Richardson & Kramer, 2006). I agree with this observation and believe that it was a move to be

freed from the straightjacket of naïve inductionism but was still insufficient for the purpose of generation of theory (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Induction relies solely on empirical observations. Its aim is to generalise in a probabilistic way. It can answer questions like the following:

What is the element common for a number of observed entities and is it true also of a larger population?
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 80)

This is the type of research question that little qualitative research attempts to address, and this study certainly does not do so. This study does not aim at generalisation in such a sense. From a critical realist perspective, generalisation is desirable for conceptualising beyond empirical data to understand the nature of things and of phenomena and to discover preconditions for them being what they are. This has much more to do with understanding of underlying mechanisms in context than with integrating experiences from individual cases into a large population. Induction is deficient in achieving this goal. Deduction is not the solution either. The type of question which deduction can answer is, for example, one such as this:

What are the logical conclusions of the premises?
(Danermark, et al., 2002, p. 80)

Deduction is logical but also tautological. It is useful in verification of theory by falsification. However, taking established rules and premises to test against empirical data does not contribute much that is new to these rules and premises except whether they are falsified or not. Deductive reasoning is incapable of generating new theory.

One of the alternatives being proposed by methodologists is abduction. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) argued that abduction is a third approach to ‘polarization between induction and deduction’. They wrote that

. . . abduction is probably the method used in real practice in many case-study based research processes. In abduction, an (often surprising) single case is

interpreted from a hypothetical overarching pattern, which, if it were true, explains the case in question. The interpretation should then be strengthened by new observations (new cases). . . . During the process, the empirical area of application is successively developed, and the theory (the proposed over-arching pattern) is also adjusted and refined. In its focus on underlying patterns, abduction also differs advantageously from the two other, shallower models of explanation. The difference is, in other words, that it includes *understanding* as well.

(Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 4)

Abduction involves using a theoretical construct of one theory about more general structures for analysing or interpreting individual events or phenomena. The idea is that the individual phenomena may be manifestations of, or part of, a general structure. Thus, when we have a new phenomenon to study, we relate it to an existing theoretical framework so as to create a new supposition about the phenomenon (Danermark et al., 2002). Creativity and imagination are brought to theorising by using an existing theory to interpret a phenomenon and by ascribing to it meaning in relation to a larger context (Danermark et al., 2002). Danermark et al. (2002) provided illumination on the thought operation of abduction as being

to interpret and recontextualize individual phenomena within a conceptual framework or a set of ideas. To be able to understand something in a new way by observing and interpreting this something in a new conceptual framework.

(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 80)

In deduction the result is a logically necessary consequence thereof. . . . In induction the rule is a conclusion with some probability. . . . In abduction the case presents a plausible but not logically necessary conclusion—provided that the rule is correct. Abduction differs from induction in that we start from the rule describing a general pattern, and it differs from deduction in that the conclusion is not logically given in the premise. Abduction is neither a purely empirical generalization like induction, nor is it logically rigorous like deduction.

(Danermark et al., 2002, pp. 89-90)

Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) did not mention the term ‘abduction’ in their text. However, their advocacy of employing theoretical frameworks to interpret data from the case in hand during comparative analysis is a strong signal of their

inclination towards something closely resembling abduction. In contrast to the original 1960s formulation and to the Glaserian variant, Strauss and Corbin (1990) apparently allowed their method to let in free association with other theoretical frameworks rather than sticking rigidly to empirical data or to rigorous logical deduction. In praise of creativity, Strauss and Corbin (1990) wrote that their method:

let the researcher's 'mind wander and make the free associations that are necessary for generating stimulating questions, and for coming up with the comparisons that led to discovery' . . .
(Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 27)

Likewise, the very foundation of abduction is 'creativity and the ability to form association' (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 93). The notion of abduction was first associated with the pioneering work of Chicago pragmatist Charles Peirce (Reichertz, 2007). This mode of inference is also adopted by critical realists for the possibility it offers of

acquiring knowledge of how various phenomena can be part of and explained in relation to structures, internal relations and contexts which are not directly observable. Such structures cannot be derived either inductively or deductively.
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 92)

Abduction attempts to answer the question:

What meaning is given to something interpreted within a particular conceptual framework?
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 80)

According to Danermark et al. (2002), with better knowledge of a phenomenon in relation to a theory, researchers can also apply this increased understanding in the following way:

To gradually test, modify and ground theories about general contexts and structures by relating these theories to ever new cases.
(Danermark et al, 2002, p. 94)

It is in this sense that Charmaz (2006) wrote that abductive reasoning was used in grounded theory when researchers looked for further experience and data in

theoretical sampling to check the theory emerging. I return to the issue of theoretical sampling later in the chapter. It suffices to say here that abduction is also applied in grounded theory to handle the question ‘what do the events say about the theory?’ (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 95). In the sense of how Danermark et al. (2002) define the term, abduction can contribute to modifying an existing theory or a new grounded theory emerging from empirical data. It is, however, incapable of generating a new theory about the precondition for a phenomenon (Danermark et al., 2002). The researcher needs another tool: retroduction. Retroduction’s thought operation is

from a description and analysis of concrete phenomena to reconstruct the basic conditions for these phenomena to be what they are.
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 80)

Retroduction is a much less popular notion for grounded theorists than are induction and abduction. Grounded theory researchers with a critical realist perspective are more inclined to apply both abduction and retroduction in the generation of grounded theory. In one of the relatively few articles (Kempster & Parry, 2011; Oliver, 2012; Partington, 1998; Pratt, 1995; Yeung, 1997) advocating or employing grounded theory from a critical realist perspective, Oliver (2012) wrote that

a critical realist grounded theory would ask of the data ‘what must be true for this to be the case?’ or ‘what makes this possible?’; and seek an explanation in generative mechanism at deeper ontological level. This is no stretch for a methodology that already encourages researchers to ask ‘what are the larger structural issues here and how do these events play into or effect what I am seeing?’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Critical realist studies draw on theory to seek all possible vertical explanations for a phenomenon. It is this vertical analysis that would be the distinguishing mark of a critical realist grounded theory. Instead of establishing the action sequence of a social process over time (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), it would explain action by reference to the deeper generative mechanisms from which it emerges.
(Oliver, 2012, p. 380)

According to Danermark et al. (2002), the fundamental question for retrodution is:

How is any phenomenon, like an action or a social organization, possible? If we call this phenomenon X, we may formulate our question thus: What properties must exist for X to exist and to be what X is? Or, to put it more briefly, what makes X possible?
(Danermark et al., 2002, p. 97)

The above discussion of the four modes of inference adopts the taxonomy of critical realism in distinguishing the concepts of abduction and retrodution (Danermark et al., 2002). However, there is often confusion in the literature about the terms *abduction* and *retrodution* because many conflate the two terms as one single mode of inference. Many grounded theorists of the Straussian tradition, as well as those of constructivist orientation, propose using abductive inference during comparative analysis to generate theory. They attribute abductive reasoning to the writings of American pragmatist Charles Peirce (Charmaz, 2006; Reichertz, 2007, 2010; Richardson & Kramer, 2006; Strubing, 2007). The problem is that Charles Peirce is widely believed to have used the two terms interchangeably in his writings (Bertilsson, 2004; Chiasson, 2005; Glynos & Howarth, 2007), even though some suggested that Peirce was misunderstood due to confused editing of his collected papers (Thompson, 2006). Considering that abduction and retrodution ought not to be conflated, Chiasson (2005) claimed that it was a mystery as to why Peirce applied the two terms indiscriminately. From their Latin roots, retrodution is 'deliberately leading backward' whereas abduction is 'leading away from' (Chiasson, 2005, p. 227). Preserving consistency with these words' roots, Danermark et al. (2002) use the term abduction to move away from a theoretical construct, a conceptual framework, or ideas applicable to a phenomenon for understanding it. On the other hand, retrodution is moving backwards from a phenomenon to reconstruct or infer the non-observable generating mechanism and the conditions making a phenomenon

what it is (Bertilsson, 2004; Danermark et al., 2002). Retroductive inference can therefore enable ‘transfactual generalization, i.e. to search for necessary, hidden conditions behind the appearances of things’ (Bertilsson, 2004, p. 385) and can generate theory (Thompson, 2006).

In this section I discuss the four basic modes of inferences. Induction and deduction are found to be inadequate for the grounded theory. Hence, I apply abduction and retroduction during data analysis and theory generation together with the basic tenets of the Straussian version of grounded theory. It would take volumes and would go beyond the scope of this study to discuss the various and confusing ways of using the terms abduction and retroduction in literature. In this study, I use both abduction and retroduction as they are defined by Danermark et al. (2002). In the next section on research design, I demonstrate how abductive and retroductive inferences contribute to dealing with limitations of interview as a data collection method, to providing tools for data analysis, and to generating theories from a small number of cases.

Research Design

This discussion of research design consists of four parts: forms of data, selection of settings and participants, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Forms of data. A grounded theory investigation is not confined to one kind of data or technique of collection. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that different kinds of data provide different views on vantage points. Documents, interviews, observations, surveys, statistics, and images can be data useful for identifying concepts and their properties which contribute to the generation of theory. The data collection process is open. It embraces multifaceted data collection from different sources, by various techniques, and is analysed in different ways, with the aim of

collecting a wide range of data that are relevant in the theory. There are different slices of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Grounded theory research therefore uses many forms of data, but many researchers rely on interviews. Interviews can capture individuals' experiences in their own words (Creswell, 2008) whilst allowing participants to answer open-ended questions and speak in great length and depth about experiences relevant to the research problem. I use the term 'interview' throughout the study in reference to the qualitative interview, which offers the types of benefits stated above, in contrast to fixed-question survey interviews. Interviews are particularly useful for understanding participants' views, attitudes, interpretations of events, understanding, values, and opinions. Such information cannot be as easily accessed in a questionnaire survey or through observation (Byrne, 2004). Interviewing is also an interactive process which allows timely clarification and follow-up questions. Parents' choice-making processes are about an experience over time and are about decisions and actions which tend to be complex, subtle, and value-laden. To gain an in-depth understanding sufficient for establishing reasonable interpretation of the process, an open, flexible, and interactive data collection process is highly valuable. I have therefore relied on interviews as the primary source of data collection in this study. I remain aware, however, that interviews as a form of data are problematic and involve risks. It may be a myth that access can be gained to private experiences in an interview (Hammersley, 2008). In this study's section on data collection, I elaborate further regarding issues with interviewing.

Besides interview data, documentary data relevant to the Voucher Scheme and to school choice were collected from government publications, from newspapers, from journals, and from research literature. These documentary data serve as a rich

source of information about regulatory framework as well as about the working of the Voucher Scheme in practice. Documents directly relating to Voucher Scheme, from the EDB and Education Commission, grasp the basis for understanding the Voucher Scheme. More documentary data from the Government is needed in order to apprehend the implications of the Voucher Scheme. For example, from documents directly related to the Voucher Scheme (EDB, 2007, 2011, 2012c; Education Commission, 2010), I learned that voucher-eligible schools are required to adopt a local curriculum. To make sense of what this means to parents, I then went to the Government's curriculum guide for kindergartens (Education & Manpower Bureau, 2006) to examine the details of the local curriculum. I found that the restriction on language used is likely to be significant. This finding was triangulated with the data collected from interviews.

Government statistics about pre-primary education and data of individual kindergartens' tuition, enrolment, and capacity provide the study with a solid fundamental understanding of the market structure of pre-primary education in Hong Kong. For example, by adding up the total number of kindergarten places at various tuition fee levels, it was discovered that the market is polarised by the Voucher Scheme into two segments with big differences in tuition fees after deductions for vouchers.

The literature about school choice, the education market, and vouchers overseas and in Hong Kong are sources of conceptual frameworks and theoretical ideas useful for abductive and retroductive inferences during data analysis. Before commencing data collection, I simultaneously did extensive reviews of the literature on school choice, on education markets, and on vouchers. This was done alongside proposal writing and design and planning for this thesis. As shown in the earlier

section of this chapter, in a discussion of the use of literature in grounded theory, the Straussian variant of grounded theory that I adopt recognises the importance of reviewing the literature to better prepare for data collection and analysis. For instance, the taxonomies used by Ball et al. (1996), by Ball and Vincent (1998), and by Vincent et al. (2010) to analyse school choice were examined critically before data collection, and then they were examined again contextually during the data collection and data analysis stages to inform my understanding and conceptualisation of the findings from the study. The literature in the field is also useful in assessing findings' plausibility (Hammersley, 1998). I return to the notion of plausibility in the section on quality issues later in the chapter.

Selection of settings and participants. Adopting an intensive research design, a qualitative approach, and a grounded theory method, my study seeks to interpret complex social phenomena and behavioural processes by investigating and making sense of individual cases in sufficient depth and manageable quantities. Statistical sampling methods seeking to represent the population of kindergarten parents in Hong Kong are unsuitable. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the process employed in my study is *ad hoc*. Sampling is guided by the need to relate the interviews, in a systemic manner, to my study and to gather data from participants, providing diversity in their positions relative to the research question (King & Horrocks, 2010). More specifically, my study follows the principles of theoretical sampling, whose primary criterion is to choose participants that help theory generation. The ongoing and iterative process is affected by the knowledge acquired during the research process. Participants are chosen and questions asked when they are needed rather than being predetermined prior to the start of research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goulding, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). There is also no

predetermined number of interviews to be conducted in the study. Data collection and theoretical sampling continue until theoretical saturation occurs. Theoretical saturation is achieved when no additional data are being found that further develop properties of the category or do more than merely add, in a minor way, to the many variations of major patterns, subject to constraints of time, energy, and other conditions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). There is no hard-and-fast rule for theoretical saturation nor any minimal sample size required for ensuring saturation. As a rough general guideline provided to researchers in the field of education, Creswell (2008) suggested 20 to 30 interviews. The number of interviews also depends on the complexity of the patterns that the research aims at discerning among participants. Warren (2002) suggested that

in general, with one-time interviews, the more comparisons to be made between sets of patterns, the more respondents are likely to be interviewed. For example, a research studying male caregivers of elderly Alzheimer's patients may decide on 20 or 25 interviews, whereas a researcher comparing male and female caregivers may seek 35 or 40.
(Warren, 2002, p. 87)

Initially, I collected data from 10 participants from two schools and started data analysis simultaneously. The final number of participants needed was still fluid at that time. Nonetheless, with two distinctive sets of parents from voucher-eligible schools and non-voucher-eligible schools, I was anticipating a total of about 25 to 30 interviews. Finally, I conducted 40 interviews in this study before I felt reasonably comfortable with achieving theoretical saturation. This is in line with what Creswell (2008) and Warren (2002) thought appropriate, and at the same time it adheres to the evolving process of theoretical sampling. The sampling process evolves and is based on 'concepts that emerged from analysis and that appear to have relevance to the evolving theory' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 202). Sampling, data collection, and

part of data analysis are integrated. Theoretical sampling, in essence, is

the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45)

My study researches kindergarten parents' school choice processes under the Voucher Scheme. I interviewed those parents who had sent their children to voucher-eligible schools and those parents who had sent their children to non-voucher-eligible schools. The Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong is universal to students but not to kindergartens. Although all kindergarten students are eligible, they lose their eligibility for vouchers if they attend for-profit kindergartens or non-profit-making kindergartens which charge school fees in excess of the limit stipulated in the scheme. In other words, some kindergartens are voucher eligible and some are not. In order to investigate whether or not vouchers are a factor of consideration in school choice, it is important to collect data from both voucher-eligible and non-voucher-eligible schools' parents. Because the Voucher Scheme was launched in September 2007, at the time I conducted my interviews, in 2010, children in all kindergarten year groups had been covered by the Voucher Scheme when they applied to and first arrived at the kindergarten.

To begin theoretical sampling, I approached two kindergartens in January 2010. The first kindergarten, School A, was voucher eligible and was located in Mongkok, which is a crowded, lower income area in inner-city Kowloon. Quite a number of the families in this kindergarten had at least one parent from mainland China. Another school, School B, was not voucher eligible because it charged annual tuition fees of HK\$37,080, which exceeds the limit of HK\$24,000 for half-day schools under the Voucher Scheme. This school was located in Kowloon Tong,

which is an area with high-end, low-density private housing and a large number of schools, including some prestigious schools, private schools, and international schools. I chose these two schools with the objective of hearing both from parents who had chosen voucher-eligible schools and from parents who had chosen non-voucher-eligible schools. Besides the need to choose one voucher-eligible school and one non-voucher-eligible school, there were no other requirements in the selection of the schools at this stage. Both of the schools I chose had principals who were my contacts in the early childhood education industry. They responded very graciously to my request for help, and they gladly offered their assistance. After I had explained fully the purpose of the research and the requirements for the interview, the principals helped solicit, from each of their schools, five parents for me to interview.

Likewise, I gained access to all schools through the principals whom I knew from working at an academic institution which runs programmes training kindergarten teachers and principals. I gave them only two criteria: The first was that, in 2010, each participant should be a parent of a current kindergarten student; the second was that the participant be willing to talk about his or her school choice in a face-to-face interview for about an hour. I verbally explained in detail to the principals the purpose and background of this study, and I then sent them letters again summarising the key points (Appendix A) along with attached participant information sheets (Appendix B) and participant consent forms (Appendix C), both of these bilingual. After reviewing what I had sent them, each principal invited five parents from their respective schools to meet with me for an interview. All interviews were held inside the campus of these kindergartens in a quiet, vacant classroom/meeting room without the presence of any personnel from the

kindergarten. The environment was generally comfortable and relaxing enough that the participant and I could have a private conversation without any interruptions or distractions. Prior understanding was reached with the school principals that conversations in the interviews would be confidential and that I would not disclose to them the information obtained from individual participants. I promised that, if they were interested in the findings, I would give them copies of this study once it had been completed and passed by the University of Durham.

Choosing principals with whom I was already acquainted and having these principals select parents for me, I was afforded the primary advantage of relative ease in accessing cooperative participants. Because the principals knew me, they were confident about making referrals. The study aims at understanding the school choice mechanism in context. It does not aim at using a small number of individual cases to generalise in representing the features of a population. Hence, random sampling is unnecessary (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), and selection by easy access is unproblematic, provided that other requirements for theoretical sampling in grounded theory are met. In using grounded theory, a sufficiently wide diversity of cases is needed to facilitate constant comparative analysis of cases. In other words, I needed to interview parents from both voucher-eligible and non-voucher-eligible schools with a variety of school features and parent backgrounds. However, I am aware that the principals might have potentially tried to portray their schools in a better light by selecting the friendliest parents, who were also the ones happiest with the schools. For practical purposes, the happier parents would have been, in any case, more likely to agree to an interview and more likely to offer their time. They would also have tended to share more willingly thoughts and actions concerning the school choice process. They would have had fewer motives for hiding or distorting their

prior actions and thoughts, as they would have been more confident about their choice. The benefits of having more forthcoming participants, I would argue, outweigh any potential risk of bias incurred by letting principals select the participants for me. As I show in this study's section on data collection, I applied counselling skills and retroductive reasoning during interviews to mitigate the risk of participants saying only kind words about the school. Moreover, the diversity in the schools to which the participants were sending their children also reduced the risk of bias.

I went to School A to do the study's first five interviews on January 19, 2010. Using the grounded theory method, I started coding right after I had collected data from parents at School A. On February 5, 2010, I went to School B to do my second round of five interviews. I did not wait until fully completing data collection before going on to do data analysis. I moved back and forth between data collection, coding, and analysis. From time to time, I did two or three of these tasks simultaneously. I compared incidents and actions revealed in these interviews to seek similarities and differences in their properties, and I compared the concepts and categories developed from different interviews to bring out the properties and dimensions of these concepts and categories. These concepts from different interviews were integrated and involved further abstraction. Going back-and-forth or 'flip-flop' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 94) between data from different interviews, to compare concepts and to develop categories and their properties, is a method for comparative analysis. Another comparative analysis technique involves comparing an incident or action revealed in the data to my own knowledge, based on experience and familiarisation with the literature, in order to sensitise the development of concepts and of their properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

So as to provide comparison in analysis, I aimed for variety among the parents I interviewed. I therefore sought a second voucher-eligible school where the parents would contrast with those I had interviewed at School A. This led me to choose School C, which was located in an area in the New Territories, far from the inner city. I learned, from conversations with principals of School A and School C, that School C had a lower concentration of lower income and of new immigrant families than did School A. School C was not situated in an affluent area, but I understood that the parents I interviewed there were better educated than were those parents I interviewed in School A. I gathered this both from information provided by the principals and from answers, during interviews, to my questions about the educational attainment, professions, job positions, and residences of the participants and of their spouses. To compare and contrast, the fourth kindergarten I went to was School D, a non-voucher-eligible school. School D was located in a private estate populated by middle-income families on Hong Kong Island. The educational group which operated School D had a history of over four decades and was fairly well known. Like School B, it was a bilingual kindergarten using English and Putonghua, whereas Schools A and C used only Cantonese, the local dialect, as the medium of instruction.

I relied on theoretical sensitivity to guide me, during theoretical sampling and data collection, in identifying the need to reach theoretical saturation. Theoretical sensitivity means the ability of researchers to conceptualise and give meaning to data so as to formulate theory as it emerges from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). After interviewing a total of 20 parents from four kindergartens, I had coded 56 concepts and felt the need to find more data to help develop and integrate them into more abstract and generalised categories useful for

generating a theory about explaining the mechanism of parental choice under the Voucher Scheme. The two voucher-eligible schools I interviewed at this stage had more grass-rooted parents, and typically their graduates were not entering elite primary schools. From my conversations with parents I interviewed in School C, I deduced that these parents were less socially disadvantaged and better educated than new immigrant parents from the mainland Chinese at School A. However, School C parents were not from the better-off segment of middle-class families, as were a number of those parents I interviewed in the two non-voucher-eligible schools, School B and School D.

To analyse data comparatively, I required data diversity; and I therefore wanted to speak to parents from a more popular kindergarten with graduates going on to elite primary schools, to parents from middle-class families, and to parents from ethnic minorities. I went to School E and School F. School E was voucher eligible and located on Lantau Island, which is geographically quite isolated from the rest of Hong Kong. There are a large number of Asian ethnic minority children attending School E. Out of the five parents I interviewed there, four were Filipinos and one was Sri Lankan. School F was also voucher eligible. It was by far the most popular and competitive school among the four voucher-eligible schools I visited. Many graduates from School F went on to elite primary schools. School F was located in Central, the financial district on Hong Kong Island. All five parents I interviewed in School F were from relatively well-off and educated middle-class families.

During analysis, I found the two non-voucher-eligible schools to be similar in many ways: Both were bilingual, and students tended to come from relatively well-off middle-class families. I decided to interview parents from two additional

non-voucher-eligible schools to aim for variety that would enable comparative analysis. School G was a kindergarten using Cantonese as the medium of instruction. English and Putonghua Chinese were taught there as additional languages; but it was not bilingual, as were School B and School D. School H was a non-voucher-eligible, bilingual kindergarten. It was less popular and located in a slightly less well-off residential area than were the other two non-voucher-eligible bilingual kindergartens, School B and School D. The search for variety brought useful new information to the analysis. For example, all 5 participants in School G mentioned, without any prompts from the interviewer, pedagogy or educational philosophy as important factors influencing school choice decision. This preference was less strongly voiced and less frequently found among participants in the other three non-voucher-eligible schools.

In a process of theoretical sampling, I did 40 interviews in eight schools. The selection of schools aimed at finding persons, places, and situations providing me with a reasonably good opportunity to gather relevant data for developing categories and to uncover their relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These interviews were spread over a time span of 11 months, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Kindergartens Interviewed

School	Date (2010)	Number of interviews	Voucher eligibility	Location	Fee before voucher	Fee after voucher
A	19 Jan	Five	Eligible	Mongkok	20,350	6,350
B	5 Feb	Five	Non eligible	Kowloon Tong	39,780	39,780
C	12 May	Five	Eligible	Fanling	21,615	7,615
D	7 Jun	Five	Non eligible	Western District	60,864	60,864
E	2 Jul	Five	Eligible	Tung Chung	16,760	2,760
F	9 Jul	Five	Eligible	Central	21,500	7,500
G	28 Oct	Five	Non eligible	Kowloon Tong	34,100	34,100
H	25 Nov	Five	Non eligible	North Point	42,360	42,360

Note. Voucher eligibility, voucher value, and tuition fees are as of school year 2010/11. From the Education Bureau.

Data collection. The 40 interviews were semi structured and open ended so as to enable the flexibility required in qualitative interviewing and to let me respond to new information and issues which emerged during interview (King & Horrocks, 2010). As Goulding (2002) stated,

with grounded theory, the most common form of interview is the face-to-face unstructured or, more realistically, semi-structured, open-ended, ethnographic, in-depth conversational interview. This is favoured because it has the potential to generate rich and detailed accounts of the individual's experience. It should also be flexible enough to allow the discussion to lead into areas which may not have been considered prior to the interview but which may be potentially relevant to the study.
(Goulding, 2002, p. 59)

The interviews lasted for between 30 and 80 minutes, except for one interview in which the parent brought along a toddler who grew impatient and distracted her mother's attention. This one meeting was ended after 20 minutes. With the consent of the participants, interviews were audio taped. I kept note taking to a minimum so as to let the conversation flow as smoothly as possible. This also enabled me to maintain a good balance between paying full attention to what the participant was saying and framing my responses and subsequent questions (King & Horrocks, 2010). I took some field notes only on occasions when I wanted to jot down a few analytical insights that came to me in the course of the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The languages these parents spoke in the interview were Cantonese, English, or sometimes a mixed code of these two languages. I chose the language I spoke in accordance with the language the parent chose to speak. These interviews were transcribed verbatim in the language of communication used in the conversations.

The initial several interviews consisted of mainly open-ended conversations allowing the participants to talk freely and with few limits. I invited the participants

to talk about what they thought was important to them, not about what I believed or about theories conjectured as being important. Prompt questions were generally opened ended and asked only so as to anchor the conversation in areas relevant, broadly speaking, to the research problem. Typical questions included the following:

- Could you tell me a little about your child?
- Could you tell me about yourself?
- Could you tell me about your spouse and other members of the family?
- Could you tell me what was it like choosing a kindergarten for your child?
- What factors did you consider?
- Why are these factors important to you?
- Where did you gather information to help with your decision?
- Have you considered other kindergartens?
- What do you know about vouchers?
- How has the voucher affected your decision?

In the subsequent interviews, I maintained a similarly open and flexible approach. Only from time to time, when circumstances deemed it appropriate, did I attempt to ask direct and specific questions connected to the categories of concepts identified and their relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Even with emerging concepts and categories which I wanted to compare and integrate, there were no fixed questions in a predetermined order, and the interviews remained semi structured. I was prepared to let participants lead conversations in unanticipated directions to give valuable new information, as long as this was relevant to the topics I intended to cover in the study (King & Horrocks, 2010).

I aimed to uncover meanings and to discover underlying mechanisms rather than to seek variables or factors. I therefore did not ask the parents being interviewed

to answer fixed and predetermined questions related to household income, education, profession, or other socioeconomic background information about the family.

Nevertheless, when I asked questions about the importance of vouchers in the course of the interview, some participants brought up the subject of family budget. In those circumstances, I followed up with probes encouraging them to expand and to say more about their family finances. As it is a sensitive subject, I did not seek to quantify the family income of the participants. Similarly, in the first few interviews, I sensed that the education and profession of the parents might bear some influence on their school choice decisions, so I asked about these issues in all subsequent interviews.

Comparative analysis in grounded theory is not for checking whether a concept appears in most cases or how many interviews exhibit this concept (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When a concept emerged in later interviews, there was no need to formulate this concept into a question then go back and ask it to every participant from prior interviews. What I did was to take this concept and compare it with those coded in prior interviews in order to look for similarities and differences. If concepts were similar, they were integrated into concepts with higher levels of abstraction and were developed to reveal properties under varying conditions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When concepts were different, I looked for extremes and opposites to bring out properties and their dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This position of Strauss and Corbin's would be problematic if grounded theory only concerned induction. Induction requires a large number of cases showing regularity of events for a concept to go from particular to generalised, from individual cases to populations. Critical realism brings to this grounded theory study a philosophical foundation for theorising and making generalised knowledge claims through

conceptualisation of events, mechanisms, and structures; there is no need for relying on empirical regularity across a large number of cases (Sayer, 1989, 2010a).

Retroductive reasoning provides a tool for discovering the causal power of social structures and the mechanisms governing relationships of concepts (Danermark et al., 2002; Elder-Vass, 2010). Therefore, the fact that some concepts only emerged late in the study in a diminishing number of cases does not pose a threat to the theory generation of the study.

The primary source of data in the study was interviews. For various reasons, interviews do not always represent accurately the participant's actual experiences. Interviews are social occasions in which participants may be preoccupied with 'self-presentation and/or with persuading others' (Hammersley, 2008, p. 90). We shall bear in mind the 'performative character of interview talk' (Hammersley, 2008, p. 90). Participants may give an account of their past behaviour based on retrospective rationalisation or may simply fail to preserve an adequate memory (Bourdieu et al., 1991). Furthermore, when people tell you they know something, even if they are honest, it does not necessarily mean that they actually know what they think they know (Hammersley, 2008). During an interview, it is not an easy task for participants to put into words their past behaviour and emotions for the benefit of an interviewer who is virtually a stranger and who has little knowledge of the interviewee or of the contexts concerning his or her question responses (Hammersley, 2008). To obtain a more accurate representation, I gave the participants repeated assurance that what they said would be treated as strictly anonymous and confidential. I also stated clearly that the research was solely for academic purposes and had nothing to do with the kindergarten that participants' children were attending or with any other schools. I am a trained and experienced counsellor and applied

counselling skills to help the participants feel less uncomfortable in talking about their children, about themselves, and about their families. Before the interviews started, I chatted with the participants a bit to help them relax and get settled down within the environment. During the interview, I refrained from using judgmental ‘yesses’ or nods. Rather, I paraphrased what was said from time to time to provide reassurance that I was listening carefully and to seek clarification about any potential misunderstandings. I also reframed statements and asked related questions to see if responses were consistent with prior statements.

One must be cautious about treating data obtained in an interview as a representation of participants’ real experiences or as a source for understanding what participants do in circumstances outside of the interview. Interviews are interactional events, and the data from an interview are a result of a local and collaborative production between the researcher and the participant (Rapley, 2004; Seale, 1998). Interview data are shaped not only by what the participant has to say, what he or she is willing to say, and what he or she is able to express, but also by the researcher’s questions, by the way the questions are asked, and by the subtle interactions between the participant and the researcher. The researcher monitors the talk, the gestures, and the emotions of the participant during the interview, and the participant does likewise with the researcher in order to determine what to say next (Rapley, 2004). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, I asked questions to cross-check school choice actions taken by the participants. For example, Parent D3 told me that she did not consider any other schools and sent her daughter to School D, because there were few kindergartens in her area offering playgroup classes for children younger than kindergarten age. I then asked her if she considered other schools at the time of applying to kindergarten year 1 (K1) because there were more options for K1. She

said that she did not consider other schools for K1. Later on, I returned to the topic and used questions in connection with voucher eligibility. The parent then said that she did apply for vouchers for K1. School D is not eligible for vouchers. According to retroductive reasoning, knowing her to have applied for vouchers led me back to the probable condition of her having had some interest in schools other than School D. I paraphrased again what she had told me about considering no alternative schools for K1 along with what she had said about applying for vouchers for K1. There was no need for me to further push with direct questions: She became aware of inconsistency, and she mentioned the name of a voucher-eligible coeducation kindergarten she had considered. Then she went on to tell me why she had not chosen the other school. As the above example shows, cross-checking the views and actions of participants for consistency, through back-and-forth questioning from different angles posted to the same participant, has sometimes been called ‘internal triangulation’ in other studies (Kluwin, Morris, & Clifford, 2004; Mullings et al., 2001).

It is normal, during daily conversation, that we expect feedback from the person to whom we are speaking. We feel awkward if the other party makes no comment on what we say and does not share with us his or her own stories. Participants in an interview may also be expecting reciprocity from the researcher (Johnson, 2002). There are two types of reciprocity: strict and complementary reciprocity (Johnson, 2002; Rapley, 2004). In strict reciprocity, the researcher is sharing with the participant ‘his or her own views, feelings or reflections on the topics being discussed’ (Johnson, 2002, p. 109). Alternatively, in complementary reciprocity, the researcher provides the participants with ‘some form of help, assistance, or other form of information’ (Johnson, 2002, p. 109). Both the

participant and the researcher bring to the interview their biographical perspectives, such as experiences, identities, knowledge, and opinions (Rapley, 2004; Warren, 2002). The participant's expectation of reciprocity and the researcher's temptation to provide this in exchange for cooperation and information tends to increase the risk of bringing into the interview talk too much of the interviewer's self. To mitigate this risk, I did two things. Firstly, as I have previously mentioned, I chatted for a few minutes with the participant before the interview started. With my background as a professional in early childhood education, I anticipated that the participants would expect me to answer their questions about education and care of children. Hence, in that few minutes of introductory chat, I explained to them the importance of me not influencing what they had to say in the interview. I proposed taking extra time at the end of the interviews to answer their questions about their children's education and development. During the interviews, I paraphrased and asked questions to keep the conversation two way, but I refrained from making any comments, even a simple 'yes' or a nod. When appropriate, I made reference to some widely known facts to clarify or reframe what a participant had said. I was conscious about my own influence as far as the interaction with each participant during interview.

Another risk which may arise is that, during an interview, the participant is asked to reflect on himself or herself. The reflection and interaction with the researcher during the interview may induce changes to the participant's understanding of the phenomena and of behaviour. In other words, the interview intervenes in the life of the participant and makes it impossible for the researcher to know exactly the participant's thoughts independently of the interview's intervention. This risk is mitigated by the fact that the object of study is decisions and actions already taken by a participant in the past. I have not investigated what people were

thinking at the time of their interviews. Their mindsets could have slightly altered, causing them to recall and interpret their past actions differently; but the risk is likely to be less severe than that associated with addressing current views or future actions. Therefore, with the internal triangulation and retroductive reasoning already mentioned, I believe this risk to have been minimised, albeit not completely eliminated.

The flexible, interactive, and interpretive nature of interview has important implications for the power balance between the researcher and the participant as far as control of what is said in the interview and how this is interpreted and reported (Byrne, 2004). Power and shifts in power are asymmetric, depending on experiences, identities, knowledge, and many other factors; and there are effects from various discourses such as age, education, and so on (Alex & Hammarstrom, 2008; Briggs, 2002). Such dynamics are inevitable. I reminded myself throughout all the interviews about being sensitive to power and to shifts in power, and I used reflexivity. Regarding interviewing, Byrne (2004) wrote that

reflexivity involves critical self-scrutiny on the part of the researchers, who need, at all stages of the research process, to ask themselves about their role in the research. Reflexibility involves a move away from the idea of the neutral, detached observer that is implied in much classical survey work. It involves acknowledging that the researcher approaches the research from a specific position and this affects the approach taken, the questions asked and the analysis produced. In the immediate context of the interview, reflexivity involves reflection on the impact of the researcher on the interaction with the interviewee.
(Byrne, 2004, p. 184)

Later in this chapter, I return to the question of how I used reflexivity.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, it is not advisable to throw the interview baby out with the methodological risk bathwater. With its flexibility, openness, and interaction, when conducted properly, interviewing can provide the researcher with a

deeper understanding of complex phenomena than many other methods are able to do. During interviews, I have used mitigating measures such as retroductive reasoning, internal triangulation, and reflexivity to deal with these limitations and methodological risks. In response to the critique of interview, Hammersley (2008) wrote that

researchers must exercise greater caution in their use of interview material, not that they should abandon all, or even the more orthodox, uses of it. This critique reminds us that, like other sources of data, interviews are far from unproblematic. . . . Scepticism, in the sense of a generally heightened level of methodological caution, rather than sustained epistemological doubt, is therefore always required . . . The arguments underlying the radical critique of interviews are not as powerful as some of the critics believe. Certainly, they do not rule out use of interviews, nor even the use of interviews as a source of information about the settings in which people participate or about their experiences, attitudes, perspectives, and so on. However, the radical critique can serve an important function in forcing us to be more circumspect in what inferences we draw from interview data.
(Hammersley, 2008, pp. 98-100)

The following section describes more specifically the data analysis procedures, begotten from the Straussian variant of the grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) and critical realism's tools for making inference (Danermark et al., 2002).

Data analysis procedures. Data analysis is a process of examining what things are and how they work. It involves detailed study of data to identify their properties and dimensions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The process covers two basic operations: asking questions and making comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). I have been constantly drawing comparisons using the data I have collected, first, in each and every case, within each school, and then across schools. By doing this, and by asking questions, I have been able to acquire knowledge. With this knowledge, I have subsequently been able to suggest explanations and to propose inference. To carry out the process effectively, I have

had to interpret, organise, and conceptualise data, so that questions could be asked about them and comparisons made. A concept is a labelled phenomenon.

Identification of concepts in qualitative data begins with coding. Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) have suggested three types of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

In my study, the first step in data analysis was open coding, which aimed at identifying as many relevant concepts as possible from the data and at discovering their properties and dimensions. Data were studied line by line in order to capture their meanings in context. They were also examined through enquiries as to possible meanings, and comparisons were made within individual cases, as well as between cases, to discover similarities and differences. Concepts of events, actions, and interactions that were similar were grouped together in smaller numbers using more abstract explanatory concepts referred to as categories. Once categories were identified, they were developed, using questions and constant comparisons, through the discovery of their properties and dimensions. Properties are the characteristics or attributes of a category, and dimensions represent the location of a property along a continuum or range.

As discussed in the previous section, theoretical sampling continued to guide the collection of additional data iteratively and reflexively during the open coding process. The data collection and open coding process are integrated and cannot be divided into two separate stages. As soon as the transcript of the first interview had been completed, I started working on open coding to identify concepts that were essential to deciding which data would be needed in further interviews.

This study adopts the Straussian variant of grounded theory. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Straussian variant has departed from the stance of Glaser

and Strauss (1967) and the Glaserian variant, and it embraces the literature as a research resource to be used before and during the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

It was long before the beginning of data collection and analysis that I started my extensive literature review within the fields of school choice and of vouchers generally, particularly in Hong Kong. I utilised the knowledge learned from the literature to inspire and guide the design of my research and of the questions asked to interview participants. Embracing the literature early on has stopped me from being limited by induction as the only mode used in making abstraction and inference in analysis. Theoretical concepts have been very useful in helping me to develop concepts that emerged during coding into categories with higher levels of abstraction. Abstraction is an important tool for analysis throughout coding and theory generation. For knowledge obtained to be relevant in practice, Sayer (2010a) remarked,

it must 'abstract' from particular conditions, excluding those which have no significant effect in order to focus on those which do. Even where we are interested in wholes we must select and abstract their constituents.
(Sayer, 2010a, p. 86)

As previously discussed, data do not speak, and theoretical concepts are useful. Existing theories and cumulative knowledge relevant to the area of study are used, because there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Strauss and Corbin (1998) admitted that literature can be beneficial in enhancing theoretical sensitivity, in helping with comparisons between dimensions and properties, in simulating questions, in suggesting areas for theoretical sampling, in providing secondary sources of data for constant comparison, and in confirming study findings. Therefore, Straussian grounded theory does not rule out doing a literature review up front, it only warns researchers about being careful not to be held hostage to the current stock

of literature. I chose to start doing my own literature review before going to the field to collect data. This enriched my theoretical sensitivity and provided me with ideas about coding.

Cantonese, the Chinese dialect used by most people in Hong Kong, was used for 35 of the interviews I conducted. This included some occasional mixed codes of Cantonese and English. Five interviews with ethnic minority participants were conducted in English. Whilst all interviews were carried out by myself, 35 audio records were transcribed into written texts in Chinese verbatim by three research assistants who were graduate students in Chinese literature. Particular attention was given to transcribing what was said in Cantonese, or any mixed codes in the conversation, instead of using grammatically correct standard written Chinese. The aim of this is to record the meanings of the words and phrases as they were intended by the parents. The five interviews conducted in English were transcribed into English text verbatim by two university students who were proficient in English. I did open coding directly for the 35 Chinese transcripts in Chinese, whilst I coded in English for the 5 English transcripts. I translated concepts identified in open coding from Chinese into English. From then on, questions and comparisons were made in English. Grouping of concepts into categories was done in English. In other words, I first identified some concepts in Chinese and then translated them into English. Categories and their properties and dimensions were developed from the beginning in English. Chinese transcripts were not translated into English except in the case of selected passages I was to use in the written report. In order to retain accuracy and subtle nuances in meanings, translation was kept to a minimum (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An excerpt of open coding of an interview conducted in English is reproduced in Figure 1 as an example. *A* represents me and *B* represents Parent E1 at School E, a

voucher-eligible school.

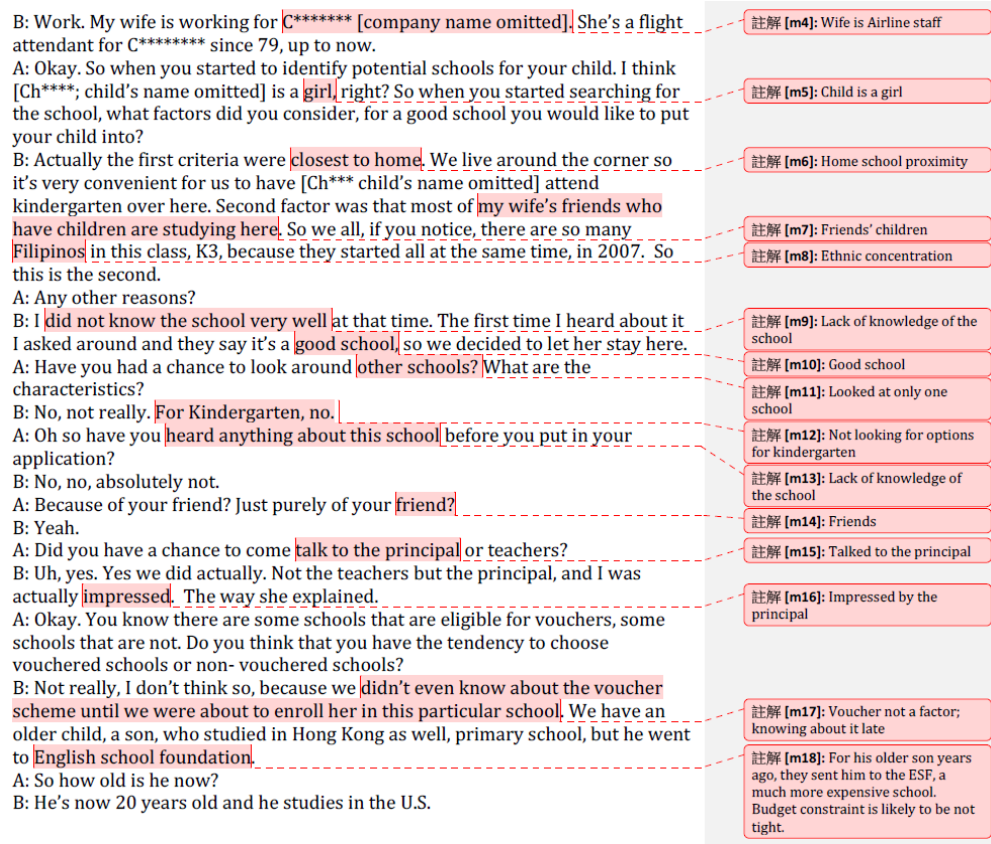


Figure 1. Excerpt of open coding on transcript.

Concepts identified in open coding were grouped in a table in Excel to enable easy filtering, sorting, indexing to relevant long quotes, and linking to transcripts. The purpose of the table is not to count frequency of these concepts' occurrences. As already discussed, from a critical realist perspective, the significance of a concept relates to how well it represents condition, mechanism, and structure, rather than empirical regularity. An excerpt of the table is shown in Figure 2. It is only a small part of the complete table, which has over 70 columns.

Parent	Voucher	Choice	Ethnic cluster/friends here	Relative & frd referral/ studied before	Does voucher matter?	Tuition Fee matters?	Knowledge of voucher?	Voucher enabling more extra curricular activities	Voucher implying over-regulation	Voucher schools have poor peers	Learn Chinese	English	Putonghua	Academic
A1	Eligible	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes					Yes		
A2	Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes				Yes		
A3	Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes							
A4	Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes						
A5	Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes						
B1	Non-Eligible	Yes			No		No		Yes			Yes	Yes	
B2	Non-Eligible	Yes		Yes	No	No	Yes			Yes				
B3	Non-Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes					Yes	Yes	
B4	Non-Eligible	Yes			No		Yes							Yes
B5	Non-Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes							
C1	Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes	Yes						
C2	Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes							
C3	Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes								
C4	Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes						
C5	Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes							
D1	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes					Yes	Yes	
D2	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes					Yes	Yes	
D3	Non-Eligible	Yes		Yes	No	Yes	Yes		Yes			Yes	Yes	
D4	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	Yes	late					Yes	Yes	
D5	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes				Yes		Yes	
E1	Eligible	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes				Yes			
E2	Eligible	Yes	Yes		No	Yes	Yes				Yes			
E3	Eligible	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes				Yes			
E4	Eligible	Yes	Yes		No	No	Yes				Yes			
E5	Eligible	Yes			No	Yes	Told by the school	Yes			Yes			
F1	Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes							
F2	Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes				Yes		Yes	
F3	Eligible	Yes		Yes	No comment but probably not	Yes	Yes				Yes		Yes	
F4	Eligible	Yes			No	Yes	Yes		Yes					
F5	Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes							
G1	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes							No
G2	Non-Eligible	Yes		Yes	No	No	Yes							
G3	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes							
G4	Non-Eligible	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes							
G5	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	Yes	Yes		Yes					
H1	Non-Eligible	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes				Yes	Yes	
H2	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	No	Yes							
H3	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	Yes	Yes					Yes	Yes	Yes
H4	Non-Eligible	Yes			No	Yes	Yes					Yes	Yes	
H5	Non-Eligible	Yes			No							Yes	Yes	

Figure 2. Excerpt of concepts emerging during open coding.

As there were no fixed questions, the concepts only emerged during the interview according to the direction in which the parent wanted to lead the discussion. From time to time, I probed with questions intended to focus the discussion on the topic of the study, asking for information relevant to concepts coded from prior interviews. Nevertheless, a concept did not need to show up in every interview, and there may have been some concepts which did not correspond

with questions I asked in the interview. For example, I did not ask whether voucher-eligible schools have poor peers or are usually not good: These would have been preconceived, biased, and leading questions. I marked these in the table because 2 participants mentioned them during the conversation. This was triangulated by some of the fear of stigma I heard from school principals.

Once concepts were identified and the more general and abstract categories were constructed, I began the next step in coding: axial coding. In axial coding, I looked for ways in which categories were related to each other. I also studied the data to uncover the dimensional range or variation of a concept and the relationship among concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To enrich my theoretical sensitivity to developing emergent categories and relationships between them, I went back to the literature review which I had done. This additionally allowed me to re-examine and expand the literature review in accordance with the concepts and categories gathered from the parents. For example, after the category of resources emerged, I did extensive reading of literature relevant to understanding more about how a family's behaviour is affected by the resources it commands. I found Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) notions of economic, cultural, and social capital highly applicable to the data, the concepts, and the categories of the study. I integrated concepts from the data of my study to categories of economic, cultural, and social capital. These categories are, in turn, subcategories under the category of resources, and they serve to denote its properties and dimensions. This is neither induction nor deduction. This is a process of abduction, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. By induction, I ask the questions of whether a feature of the data is common for a larger population. This does not bring me to Bourdieu's theoretical framework or to any other framework. At the same time, my study's purpose is not to deductively test each of the grand

sociological theories with the data so as to verify any particular theory in the context of school choice under Hong Kong's Voucher Scheme. I posed the abductive question of what meaning applies to the categories of resources interpreted within different conceptual frameworks. In asking this question, I examined the theories I know to find out what meaning each of them gave to the phenomenon studied. I finally fell upon Bourdieu's theories and found that they enlightened my understanding of the phenomenon and provided a plausible explanation. In such a way, abduction helps to bring in an existing theoretical framework to theorise the relationship between household resources and school choice strategies being adopted. What this abductive inference does is to redescribe or 'recontextualise, i.e. to observe, describe, interpret and explain' a social phenomenon 'within a frame of new context' (Danermark, et al., 2002, p. 91) so that we can better understand the phenomenon and can use abstraction. The purpose is not to use the phenomenon for verifying a theory, as in deduction.

Besides abduction, as mentioned in the section on modes of inference and data collection, I constantly asked the question of what made a particular school choice strategy possible. This was a process of retroduction. For example, some parents empowered by the voucher with financial resources still tended to be less interested in taking up longer term strategies to pave the way for academic success years into the future, instead favouring present gratification, such as the concern of giving their children happy childhoods. Although this is very legitimate reasoning, at first glance, there remains the question of what made a parent think that her or his child would be less happy at an elite school, which would be more likely to lead to transitioning into an academically strong primary school. With vouchers, some elite schools are accessible to lower income families. The elite school may be difficult to

access, but why did some parents make an attempt whereas others did not? What made this possible? An elite school may not necessarily be preferable, but it is worthwhile, nonetheless, to find out why parents' attitudes differ in this respect. Asking this type of retroductive question throughout the data collection and analysis process has helped to give me the necessary theoretical sensitivity and creativity to inspect new areas, and to do so more deeply, for explanations. In the analysis process, retroduction is carried out not in isolation but together with abduction. When considering what made the strategy possible and coming up with a few ideas for possibilities, I asked the parent questions related to the expectations that he or she had of his or her child and what difficulties were associated with choosing an elite school and so on. I also started asking questions related to expectations and difficulties with long-term strategies and pondered what these concepts meant in other cases. I checked the literature to look for possible explanations.

With the help of abduction and of retroduction, I conceptualised the school choice decision process to locate it within a conditional structure. This brings together conditions, mechanisms, and actions, which denoted the parents' school choice strategies. In the Analysis and Findings chapter, tables are used to summarise the relationships between categories on the one hand and their properties and dimensions on the other hand. In addition, quadrant diagrams are used to present the dynamics of the category *acting strategically*, visually representing the subcategorised properties and dimensions.

Open coding and axial coding are iterative processes. After the open coding of the first ten interviews, I started doing axial coding for them. As categories and their relationships emerged, I went back to the field to do more interviews in accordance with theoretical sampling. I continued to do interviews, open coding, and

axial coding until categories were saturated subject to the constraints of time and resources. To help analysis, I also wrote memos to record my ideas about the data, the literature, and my findings. Memos were sometimes mixed with coding and written on the transcripts alongside the codes, whereas at other times they were written in separate files or simply on a single sheet of paper, which I found handy for jotting down ideas. An example of a memo is shown in Figure 3.

10 July 2010

Interviewed five parents at School F yesterday. F is a voucher eligible school. None of these parents said vouchers matter. Chatted with the principal -----she told me that she had to push hard to get the parents to fill in the form to send to the Government to redeem vouchers. These parents did seem not caring much about voucher -----very different from the earlier three voucher eligible schools: A, C & E.

Not yet have transcript. Just from recalling--- codes -- transition to primary school, school reputation, pedagogy/philosophy -----important factors----- > different from says parents in School A ----- > codes there are: vouchers, home-school proximity, campus, hygiene/air ventilation, small class..... Parents in School F talked a lot about getting their children to an elite primary school as well as future development. Those in School A, except A2, tend to be less strategic and less long-term focused.

Other differences?

School A:

- Mainland parents;
- Lower SES
- More budget constraints;
- None of them have U education
- Not professional/managerial work

School F:

- Local Hk;
- Doctors/professional;
- Higher income

Resources – a category -- What specific properties? Not only about money. Bourdieu's three capitals? Stephen Ball's class strategies?

Go back to read more about Bourdieu. Revisit once interviews transcribed and coded. Check notes and codes in C & D to compare. Also check B, D & E. e.g. some E parents seem lacked of social capital.

Figure 3. A memo sample.

The categories, their properties and dimensions, and relationships were developed from data collected by in-depth interviews to inform the research problem. I then re-examined and once again expanded the literature review on the Hong Kong Voucher Scheme and on parental choice in light of the categories and relationships

constructed in the study. Next, I integrated and refined the theory in a process called *selective coding*, whereby I decided on a central category which pulls the other categories together to provide a logical and consistent explanation of the theory developed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). During selective coding, concepts were further integrated around the central category. After the theory emerged from open coding and axial coding and from theorising using selective coding, a theory was generated to illustrate the relationships between the categories. The next step in my study was a narrative discussion to further develop the meaning of the theory.

Quality Issues

This section discusses issues related to the quality of this study. I first look at how the quality of research is assessed. After that, I apply a reflexive stance to deal with how I, being a researcher, might have influenced the participants, the objects, and the social world I study and how I might have been influenced by them. Finally, I address the issue of ethical considerations during the research process.

Assessing quality. As a researcher, I desire to produce a good piece of research. The problem is pinpointing what makes for good quality in qualitative research. It is a more difficult question than it initially seemed when I first approached it. There are many contested philosophical and methodological perspectives about qualitative research, and they put forth very different views about quality. Whilst many debate what criteria should be used in evaluating qualitative research (Hammersley, 1992, 1998, 2008, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln et al., 2011; Seale, 1999, 2004), some others question whether criteria of quality are feasible or even at all desirable in qualitative research (Kvale, 1995; Schwandt, 1996; Smith, 1984; Wolcott, 1990).

In natural science and, for a long time, in social science too, the dominant

concept of quality in research has been described by the two key positivist criteria of validity and reliability. In the positivist tradition, the concepts of validity and reliability are based on correspondence to truth (Kvale, 1995) and tend to be associated with testing and measurement (Wolcott, 1990). Reliability concerns whether the same conclusions are reached by another researcher following the same methodology or the same results achieved applying the design and methods to the study of other settings (Seale, 1999). Validity, in its positivist roots, describes the extent to which a proposition corresponds to the truth (Kvale, 1995; Seale, 1999). There are numerous presentations of the concept. Naming just a few, Wolcott (1990) summarises that these include

as a twosome: external and internal; as a threesome: instrumental (pragmatic, criterion; also predictive, concurrent), theoretical (construct), and apparent (face); and as a foursome: content (face, apparent; also sampling), predictive, concurrent, and construct (or theoretical). If I have correctly situated these major terms, there are still others not easily placed—conclusion validity, ontological validity, overall validity, and practical validity. (Wolcott, 1990, p. 123)

Stepping outside of positivist realm, validity can also be defined as ‘quality of craftsmanship’, ‘communicative validity’, and ‘pragmatic validity’ (Kvale, 1995). There are many more other presentations and conceptualisations of the notion of validity, and they are often not compatible because of the inquiry paradigm differences embedded in their formulation. Lincoln et al. (2011) remarked that

nowhere can the conversation about paradigm differences be more fertile than in the extended controversy about validity. (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 120)

Validity implies the independent existence of reality, and reliability suggests that reality is consistently knowable to researchers. These criteria have naturally been found problematic by many social researchers who have adopted the perspective of multiple realities in ontology and of constructivism and

postmodernism in epistemology. In response, Smith (1984) suggested that the quest for similar kind of criteria in qualitative research was misguided and that the purpose of social research is not to discover any truth but to keep the conversation going among social actors and to let voices be heard:

Given the idea that social reality is mind-dependent, that facts cannot be separated from values, that the only point of view we have is that of various people based on various interests and purposes, and so on, it is impossible to be foundational or to 'ground it right.' In this situation, what is trustworthy or true is nothing more than what we can agree, at any given time and place, is trustworthy or true. . . . We are 'beyond method.' There are no procedures or criteria exclusive to or particularly appropriate for social inquiry. . . . Social inquiry might be best seen as . . . interpreting other people to us. . . . These interpretations are not about certitude or the discovery of how things really are—they are an attempt to enlarge the conversation and to keep it going. (Smith, 1984, pp. 389-390)

On the other hand, Lincoln and Guba (1985) took a different approach and, rather than abandoning criteria in evaluating the quality of research completely, devised an alternative notion of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness refers to how an inquirer can persuade the 'audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). The basic issue is no longer about truth but about getting a consensus from the audience. Lincoln and Guba (1985) originally formulated trustworthiness according to four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In brief, credibility refers to the extent to which the findings are approved by the participants being studied; transferability is how well findings can be applied in similar contexts; dependability refers to the stability of data collected over time; confirmability refers to how firmly the research process is rooted in contexts rather than in conjecture by the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). However, tension exists between the multiple constructed realities in their constructivist paradigm and the notion of trustworthiness which depends on making reference, at least implicitly, to a single

reality (Seale, 1999). Guba and Lincoln (1989) resorted to another set of criteria of various types of authenticity. In judging the quality of research, Lincoln et al. (2011) proposed asking the following question:

Are these findings sufficiently authentic (isomorphic to some reality, trustworthy, related to the way others construct their social worlds) that I may trust myself in acting on their implications? More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them?
(Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 120)

This kind of formulation of validity does no more than represent a consensus of views about what various people think the realities are (Seale, 1999). In my opinion, neither rejecting validity and saying ‘farewell to criteriology’ (Schwandt, 1996; Smith, 1984; Wolcott, 1990) nor resorting to ‘social construction of validity’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kvale, 1995; Lincoln et al., 2011) are satisfactory. With a realist ontology and interpretive epistemology, and with a research purpose of generating theory about a complex and subtle human decision process rather than testing of propositions, I turn to the quality criteria of Martyn Hammersley (1992, 1998). Unlike Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) and Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) formulation, Hammersley’s concept of quality is not based on participants’ endorsement but on pragmatic considerations of adequate evidence in support of a knowledge claim to the truth, albeit partial and fallible, and of such claims’ relevance. Martyn Hammersley (1992, 1998) devised his subtle realism, which resembled the critical realism family. Hammersley positioned himself between the positivist notion at one end of the spectrum and constructivist and postmodern thinking at the other end. Hammersley (1998) defines ‘validity’ as

truth: the extent to which an account accurately represents the phenomena to which it refers.
(Hammersley, 1998, p. 62)

However, he went on to say that:

we can never know with certainty whether (or the extent to which) an account is true, for the obvious reason that we have no independent, immediate and utterly reliable access to reality. Given that this is the situation, we must judge the validity of claims on the basis of the adequacy of the evidence in support of them.
(Hammersley, 1998, p. 69)

To assess the validity of research findings, Hammersley (1998) proposed a three-step approach: plausibility, credibility, and evidence.

1. The first question that we must ask about a knowledge claim is how plausible it is; that is, whether or not it is very likely to be true given what we currently take to be well-established knowledge.
2. A second question we may need to ask is whether it seems likely that the ethnographer's judgement of matters relating to the claim are accurate given the nature of the phenomena concerned, the circumstances of the research, the characteristics of the researcher, and so on. I will call this 'credibility'.
3. Where we conclude that a claim is neither sufficiently plausible nor sufficiently credible, we will require evidence to be convinced of its validity. However, when we examine the evidence we shall have to employ much the same means to assess its validity as we applied to the claim itself: we will judge its plausibility and credibility.
(Hammersley, 1998, p. 67)

The notion of plausibility is based on our existing knowledge about the claim, whereas credibility is concerned with the circumstances. Although knowledge is always value and concept laden, some accounts are considered to be more plausible than others, given our existing knowledge about the world. The notion of plausibility is much less restrictive than is the positivist correspondence theory of truth, though the former contains some elements of the latter (Seale, 1999). To be plausible, the knowledge claims are to be supported by well-established knowledge or additional evidence. The intensity of the evidence required is related to the type of claims being made and whether the evidence provided is central to the claim (Hammersley, 1992). In this study, I employed existing knowledge and the literature as a resource to support plausibility throughout the data analysis and theorising process. An extensive

review is done on the literature for school choice, for educational vouchers, and for related social theory. I thereby assess the plausibility, in relation to well-established knowledge in the field, of the theoretical explanation developed in the analysis.

In addition, constant comparison was used to contrast and verify concepts, categories, and their relationships so as to develop evidence ensuring findings' plausibility. Throughout the analysis, findings in the study and in the theory emerging are compared and contrasted critically with the literature, with this comparing and contrasting being implemented more intensively in the narrative discussion section.

The research also needs to be credible given the circumstances, the way the research is conducted, and the attributes of the researcher (Hammersley, 1992, 1998, 2008). In the study, credibility is enhanced by rigorously applying the Straussian variant of the grounded theory method's open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). My solid experience in counselling and in pre-primary education lends further credibility to the research, as does my practice of reflexivity throughout.

Whether the research findings are of quality and are valuable depends not only on validity but on its 'relevance to issues of actual or potential public concern' (Hammersley, 1998, p. 70). Trivial findings which are valid but have no relevance to public concerns or add nothing to the existing body of knowledge have little value. Unlike Lincoln and Guba's (1985) and Guba and Lincoln's (1989) formulation, Hammersley's concepts of quality are not based on participants' endorsement but on pragmatic considerations of adequate evidence in support of a knowledge claim to the truth, albeit partial and fallible, and of such claims' relevance.

With school choice and the Voucher Scheme as objects of research, this study

is highly relevant to a wide range of stakeholders, particularly in the pre-primary education industry, as well as to the general public. Subsidies for pre-primary education have been a frequent subject of public policy debate in recent years. However, research on school choice and on the Voucher Scheme is limited in Hong Kong. Even in the wider global research community, the existing body of knowledge tends to focus on analysing school choice factors as independent variables. This study provides an analytical framework and a theory generated to expound on the process of school choice under the intervention of vouchers. The study thereby supplements the existing body of knowledge in the respective field of study.

Before closing this subsection about assessing quality, it is worthwhile to situate the adoption of Hammersley's (1992, 1998, 2008) criteria for quality against the criteria normally used for the grounded theory method. To do so is to engage the methodology adopted in this study with the grounded theory method literature and its systems of terminology. It is thereby demonstrated that Hammersley's criteria are compatible, viable, and, in fact, a better alternative to the criteria more commonly used in the grounded theory literature.

As with Hammersley's pragmatic considerations of adequate evidence to support the plausibility and credibility of research, in the original formulation of grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasise that a theory grounded in data must fit and work. By 'fit' Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 3) mean that 'the categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study'; by 'work', they mean the categories must be 'meaningfully relevant to and ... able to explain the behaviour under study.' In a way, this resembles the notion of plausibility. The findings and emergent theory were reviewed and refined for logic, for consistency, and for credibility. Gaps in less developed categories were filled as

much as possible, according to time and energy constraints, by returning to the data collected. The credibility and consistency of the research were built in the process of comparative analysis and of the constant data checking and emergent theories.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), credibility is based on

the detailed elements of the actual strategies used for collecting, coding, analyzing, and presenting data when generating theory, and on the way in which people read the theory.
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 224)

In the Straussian variant of grounded theory, the evaluation criteria are focussed on the research process and on the empirical groundings of the research findings, which are also closely related to the research process. Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and Corbin and Strauss (1990) presented two checklists on evaluation: One was on the research process and the other was on the empirical grounding of findings. I do not use these checklists in the study, because I do not find the checklist criteria to be informative. Examples include ‘What major categories emerged?’ and ‘Are concepts generated?’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 269-270). These questions and criteria are vague and not very telling with regards to assessing the quality of research. Furthermore, I foresee possible risks: losing the merit of qualitative research’s openness and the potential to become overly rigid due to using a fixed checklist with emphasis on the rules and procedures of the research process. However, Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1998) emphasis on the research process is similar to Hammersley’s (1992, 1998, 2008) notion of credibility, and the empirical grounding of findings is not equal to but is compatible with Hammersley’s notion of plausibility and requirements for evidence.

In this study, I employ Hammersley’s (1992, 1998, 2008) notions of validity and relevance as the guiding principles. I find their purpose and logic to be most

convincing and their underlying principles most appropriate in relation to my own ontological and epistemological premises and the nature of the study. Next, I turn to a discussion of reflexivity during the research process.

Reflexivity. A critical realist perspective recognises the necessity of interpretive understanding of meaning in social science research. Critical realism also acknowledges the fact that researchers' positions are always related in some way to the objects they study and that researchers interact with participants (Sayer, 2000). I use reflexivity to address the issue of how I might have influenced the participants, the objects, and the social world I study and how I might have been influenced by them during the research process (Maxwell, 2012).

Reflexivity has a vital role in qualitative research. Researchers embracing a qualitative approach have come to accept that subjectivity is a defining feature of qualitative research and that 'research is co-constituted—a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationship' (Finlay, 2003, p. 5). We all bring our subjective meanings and values to our research in the collection, interpretation, and analysis of data as well as in the representation of findings. This is however 'not treated as a problem to be avoided, but as a resource that can be developed in ways that augment and intensify social research' (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 126). By using reflexivity, we take a critical and constructive stance towards locating the impact of subjectivity. Instead of suppressing subjectivity as in quantitative research, reflexivity facilitates researchers to gain 'insights into the context, relationships and power dynamics germane to the research setting', and the personal is 'a resource to be exploited in order to enrich the quality of analysis' when doing qualitative research (Gough, 2003, p. 22).

The term reflexivity and its uses have many variants (Finlay, 2003; Gough,

2003; King & Horrocks, 2010), and it is beyond the scope of this study to review many of them. In this study, I adopt the three forms of reflexivity first suggested by Wilkinson (1988) and subsequently further elaborated upon by Gough (2003). These three forms of reflexivity are personal reflexivity, functional reflexivity, and disciplinary reflexivity. Personal reflexivity implies that

the researchers make visible their individuality and its effects on the research process. There is an attempt to highlight those motivations, interests and attitudes which the researcher has imported to the research and to reflect on how these have impacted on each stage.
(Gough, 2003, p. 23)

I am a practitioner in the field of early childhood education, which is also the area of investigation in this study. I am an educator running courses to train both in-service and pre-service kindergarten teachers in a university in Hong Kong. The division under my management also provides consultancy services to kindergartens in Hong Kong and does contract work for the Education Bureau of the Government of Hong Kong in the area of early childhood education, which is the field of this research. Kindergarten teachers, kindergarten principals, kindergarten owners and operators, and the Education Bureau all are stakeholders in the Voucher Scheme which I am studying. Meanwhile, at the same time, I am interacting with them regularly at my workplace and in my profession as an education service provider to them. My university also operates a kindergarten, and I am the supervisor of the kindergarten principal and a member of the board of managers. In my profession and in my workplace, I frequently deal with kindergarten parents, who are the subject of my study. I am strongly motivated by and interested in learning more about the impact of the Voucher Scheme as well as about how parents choose a kindergarten. Such knowledge will benefit me at work and professionally. Given my heavy involvement in the field, the risk is that I have already accumulated ideas, opinions,

and beliefs about parental choice and about the Voucher Scheme even before having embarked upon this study. I may not have been able to maintain neutrality and open-mindedness at all times throughout the research process. My knowledge and experience in the field as a practitioner and my many prior encounters with kindergarten parents may have affected my objectivity in interpreting what parents told me in interviews. To mitigate this risk, I have constantly reminded myself about the potential bias I might otherwise bring to the research, and I have made an effort to always listen carefully to the participants with an open mind. In addition, the systematic and step-by-step coding and analytic procedure of the grounded theory has also helped me to minimise such risk. On the other hand, my connections within the industry have opened doors for me: I was able to have the cooperation of kindergarten principals in gaining access to parents at their schools, and my relevant credentials have helped me to gain trust of and good rapport with parents whom I interviewed.

I am a candidate studying for a doctoral degree in education. In this role, I am a learner and have motives not only for researching a problem but also for gaining knowledge of how to research educational issues. Hence, I have a positive and open attitude towards studying. I am keen to learn from the expertise of my supervisor in areas of study and in research approaches which may be new to me. I have not wished to constrain myself to the areas and approaches with which I am most familiar and comfortable.

I am also a parent of two children and have had experience of choosing schools for them. My personal experience as a parent may have helped me to empathise with the parents whose decision process has been the subject of my research. It has not been difficult for me to put myself in parents' shoes and to let my

educator self take a temporary backseat. On the other hand, I need to be aware of potential biases caused by my own parental experience. My other personal attributes, such as my female gender and middle-class background, have also had potential influence on how I have interpreted the data. However, this has been much mitigated by my conscientiousness about such risks.

In this study, I am a researcher who collects and analyses data with the aim of answering questions relating to the research. I am motivated by scholarly curiosity and a desire to add to the body of knowledge in the field. This role is largely neutral and independent of the subject and outcome of the research. It is not without risk, though. Functional reflexivity addresses this risk, as it

relates to one's role as a researcher and the effects this might have on the research process. It focuses attention on the different identities presented within the research and the interactions between researcher and participants. Here, a key issue concerns the distribution of power and status within the research process.
(Gough, 2003, p. 23)

I am aware that, as a researcher, I am not free from aspirations of arriving at conclusions which I perceive as 'useful'. As I am in control of interpreting data and of presenting the findings, there are risks of forcing meanings onto the data and of *confirmation bias*, which means giving preference to data that confirm my preconceived ideas and my prior knowledge and experience of the subject. The participants cannot speak directly to the audience of the study. They speak through me. I can then filter, select, and interpret in the way I deem appropriate. There was a power imbalance between myself and the participants, and I paid a lot of attention to making sure I let the participants speak. Again, some of the risks are mitigated with the help of the grounded theory's systemic coding procedures and the fact that I have constantly reminded myself about trying to minimise the risks. Nonetheless, for

various reasons, such as the possibility of me being perceived as an expert in the field, participants could have been prevented from speaking their views.

Whilst I had more power in the interpretation and presentation of what participants said in the interview, they also had power over what they wanted to tell me or to not tell me. Some of them might have desired to present themselves as 'good' parents and told me their stories accordingly. Being invited to an interview was, in itself, an intervention which could have caused participants to reflect on their school choice processes, and most participants 'gave thought in advance to what they would say at the meeting' (Nicolson, 2003, p. 140). The participants and myself, a researcher, were engaged in the interactive process of co-constructing 'reality' as related by them in the interviews and as interpreted and presented by me in the study. The implication is that my study can make no claim to the 'truth' but only to a plausible explanation obtained through a credible research method.

Wilkinson's (1988) third form of reflexivity, as cited in Gough (2003), is disciplinary reflexivity, which refers to

a critical stance towards the place and function of the particular research project within broader debates about theory and method. It suggests delineating those existing concepts and traditions which have been important in shaping the research and calls for some discussion of the potential contribution of the research to a particular literature.
(Gough, 2003, p. 24)

This is a political dimension of reflexivity. My study involves an area where the implications are significant, politically and for the industry, and my role in this is multifaceted. I am acquainted with the officials at the Education Bureau, and they are aware of my research, expecting me to show them the findings some time after its completion. My reporting of the findings will potentially impact, to a certain extent, future government policy formation. I am also a kindergarten industry

participant and have vested interest in seeing governmental changes in favour of the industry or of some groups in the industry. For example, the Voucher Scheme has excluded my kindergarten because of the tuition fee ceiling. Therefore, in writing this study, I could have a motive for portraying kindergartens similar to my own in a favourable light. Using reflexivity, I retain control over these potential threats to validity by constantly reflecting on them throughout the research process.

Reflexivity is useful, but it cannot completely remove the risk of intervention brought by my presence into the research. With solid counselling training and constant reflection, I believe I know myself reasonably well, but this knowledge is still far from complete. In fact, people are able to know only a small portion of their own consciousnesses (Cutcliffe, 2003). I cannot use reflexivity on the part of myself that I do not know. When I have tried to put myself in participants' positions, it has also been a difficult task. It may not even be possible to do this all the time (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). In a brief encounter during an interview, I could have been at risk of bias due to my stereotyped perception of participants from certain backgrounds or of those with certain demeanours. Likewise, when it was important to be transparent and tell the participants about my biography, my delivery of it and participants' interpretations could have been problematic as well. For example, a participant may have wanted to explain things in a certain way, based on her or his perception of my persona and of my own biographical interpretation. Mentioning these threats to validity does not mean that they all hold true. In fact, by using reflexivity for them, I have been able to increase my awareness of these threats and to stay alert throughout the research process. It is impossible to eliminate all risks, but I certainly have made an effort to keep these risks controlled. In the following section, I look at ethical aspects of interacting with the participants.

Ethical considerations. During the data collection process, I put strong emphasis on adhering to the professional ethics of research. I made conscious effort to ensure compliance with the leading British codes of practice for research and ethical guidelines by referring to the UK Research Integrity Office (2009) and the British Educational Research Association (2011). This research was also approved by Durham University's Ethics Advisory Committee. Most important, the research was explained to the participants, and informed consent was obtained from all of them.

As the participants had the right to know about the nature of the research and to withdraw at any time during the process, I first had to provide them with the necessary information, to remind them about their rights, and then to obtain their informed consent (Ryen, 2004). I asked school principals to brief study participants, during recruitment, on the nature of the interview and on the purpose of the study. Parents were therefore given, prior to accepting their interview invitations, some idea of what they were volunteering for. At the beginning of each and every interview, I provided the parent with a thorough verbal explanation of the interview and of the study, and I presented him or her with a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B) covering the following frequently asked questions:

- What is the interview/questionnaire about?
- What does the interview/questionnaire involve?
- Who is conducting the interview/survey?
- How much time will the interview/questionnaire take?
- Will our conversation be tape recorded or video recorded?
- Will anyone else know about what I say in the interview/questionnaire or my identity?

- Can I withdraw from the study?
- Can I request information about the findings of the research or any other related information?
- To whom can I complain?

I then emphasised to the participants that the interviews would be voluntary and asked them to sign participant consent forms (Appendix C) if they were still willing to do the interviews. Another ethical issue is confidentiality (Ryen, 2004). It was my duty to keep the names and identities of the participants from being disclosing to others. School names and participant names were made anonymous by using codified pseudonyms. Because I was acquainted with the principals of the kindergartens that study participants' children attended, I had to be mindful not to pass on any information to the principal before aggregation and to protect the identity of the information's source. This was particularly important when trust was established between myself and the parents during the interviews. It is also an ethical consideration in research not to break the trust established.

Summary

The start of this chapter includes a reflection on my world views so as to situate myself in the appropriate inquiry paradigm. From there, I have proceeded to discuss the selection of an intensive research design and of a qualitative approach to research. Discussion has been used to illuminate the meaning of theory generation and to introduce four modes of inference in theorising.

Establishment of these backgrounds is followed by an introduction to grounded theory. An important reason for using grounded theory is that I have needed a qualitative method to disentangle and make sense of the complex and subtle parental choice processes. The systematic approach of grounded theory suits

my study well. In light of my ontological and epistemological premises, I have chosen to use the Straussian variant of grounded theory as the primary source for the method of the study.

Using grounded theory, my data collection was guided by theoretical sampling. Interviews were the major source of data, these being supplemented by documentary data. Soon after the first interview, I started open coding, and I then carried out both open and axial coding at the same time to identify concepts, to develop categories, and to discover the relationships between them. Analysis was carried out at the same time as coding was taking place. As coding and analysis progressed, diagrams were constructed to visually represent relationships. After that, categories and relationships were further compared and refined during selective coding. To make inference in analysis, abduction and retroduction were introduced to complement the grounded theory method.

For qualitative research, reflexivity is the tool to mitigate potential risks incurred by inevitable subjectivity and to turn it into a useful tool for research. I have discussed personal, functional and disciplinary flexibility in the context of this study.

Finally, an analytical timeline is shown in Figure 4 to illustrate the ‘whats’ and ‘whens’ from the study’s duration. In the next chapter, I present the data analysis and findings.

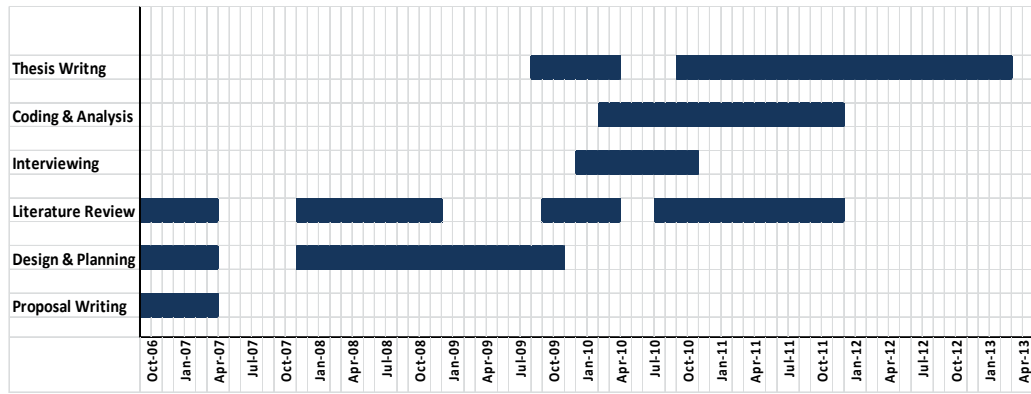


Figure 4. Timeline of the study.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Findings

I interviewed a total of 40 parents from eight schools. Four of the schools were voucher eligible and the other four were non voucher eligible. In this chapter, I present the findings from the data analysis in four sections: analytical framework, emergent categories, the paradigm model generated, and the narrative discussion.

The paradigm model was introduced by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to link categories systematically and visually in a set of relationships between them. The next section in this chapter explains the key components and logic of the model (see Figure 5). After that, the voluminous section on emergent categories expounds on the categories identified from the data. Along with the *central category*, these categories are *causal conditions*, *contextual conditions*, *intervening conditions*, *actions and interactions*, and *consequences*.

I aim to construct a theory on school choice under a voucher regime. To this end, after identifying the categories and integrating them into a paradigm model (see Figure 11), I elaborate the model further in a narrative discussion. My purpose is to enrich the analysis by supplementing the simplified visual abstraction contained in a few diagrams. A detailed storyline links the categories, and a set of relational statements explains, in a general sense, the central category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 145) in the last section of the chapter. Moreover, in the narrative, reference and comparison are made to literature in the field so that findings can be confirmed and inadequacies in the literature illustrated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 51-52).

Analytical Framework

This study adopts the analytical framework of a paradigm model to integrate the findings from the coding and analysis of data. The model, as illustrated in Figure 5, sets forth the categories in a set of relationships denoting *causal conditions*,

central category, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, action and interactions, and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). The purpose of the paradigm model is not to analyse the categories as variables and come up with predictions. Rather, it enables researchers

to think systematically about data and to relate them in very complex ways. Just as now when you encounter certain life situations you automatically rely on a causal model (something has happened because of this cause or condition) to explain to yourself and to others why it may have occurred. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 99).

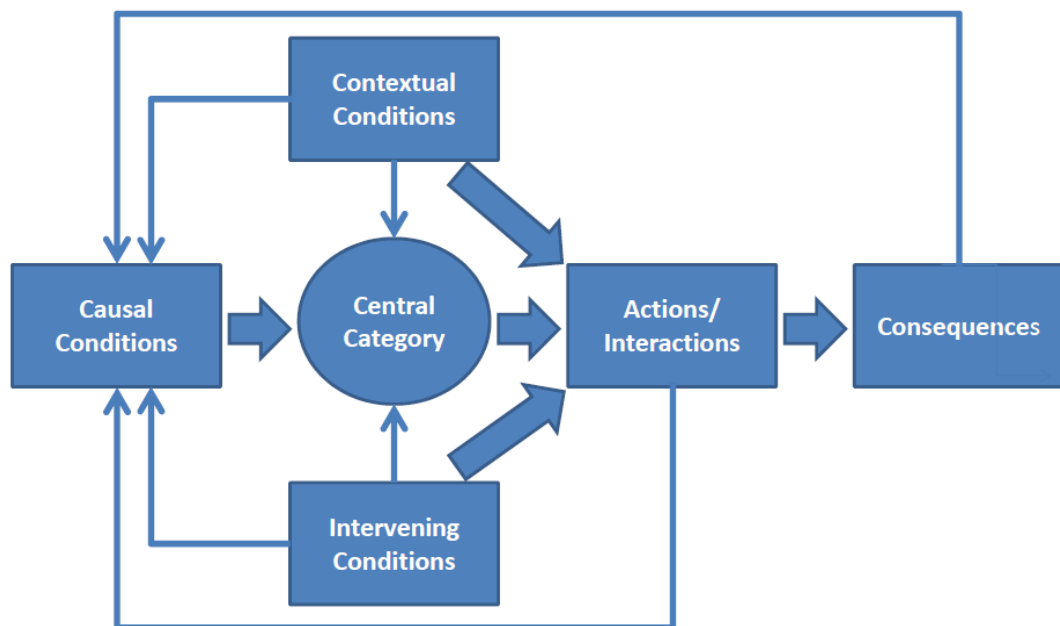


Figure 5. An illustration of the paradigm model.

At the centre of the paradigm model is the *central category*, which is also interchangeably referred to as the *central phenomenon* in Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). The central category is chosen according to Strauss and Corbin (1998, pp. 146-147) because it appears in all cases; other major categories can be related to it, and these together provide a logical and consistent explanation of the research question. The phenomenon represented by the central category is primarily influenced by events or happenings which are integrated into categories referred to

as *causal conditions* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 131). In Figure 5, the thick lines and arrows represent the direction of the major flows of causality. The thin lines and arrows, meanwhile, illustrate how the central category and causal conditions are also informed by other categories and by feedback from consequences as well as from actions and interactions.

Under the influence of causal conditions, the central category generates actions and interactions, routine responses to occurrences and strategic handling of situations, problems, and issues (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 133). Hence, in Figure 5, causal conditions influence the central category, which in turn leads to actions and interactions. Nevertheless, such actions and interactions are precipitated, hampered, or modified by other mitigating factors. These factors include the general structure of the environment and the specific contexts which apply; in grounded theory, the former types of factors are referred to as intervening conditions and the latter as contextual conditions. Intervening conditions mitigate or otherwise alter the impact of causal conditions on phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 131). Contextual conditions are the specific sets of conditions that intersect dimensionally to create the set of circumstances in connection to a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 132). In Figure 5, thick lines and arrows show intervening conditions and contextual conditions both leading to actions and interactions. This illustrates how such mitigating factors, in conjunction with the central category, determine actions and interactions. In addition, thin lines and arrows show that causal conditions and the central category are, at the same time, informed by contextual and intervening conditions. The outcomes of such actions and interactions are called consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 128). Hence, in Figure 5, the flow of causality goes from actions and interactions to consequences. Subsequently, actions and interactions, as

well as consequences, generate feedback to inform the category of causal conditions.

A dynamic model is the result.

Emergent Categories

Categories developed in the analysis are *emergent categories*. Drawing on the grounded theory method and critical realism, I use the term for this study in two senses. First, it is the nexus of the grounded theory method that categories and their properties emerge from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967):

The analyst starts by coding each incident in his data into as many categories of analysis as possible, as categories emerge or as data emerge that fit an existing category.

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105)

Lower level categories emerge rather quickly during the early phases of data collection. Higher level, overriding and integrating, conceptualizations—and the properties that elaborate them—tend to come later during the joint collection, coding and analysis of the data.

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 36)

As I explain in the methodology chapter, data itself is inadequate for theory generation, and approaching an empirical domain without any theoretical preconceptions is infeasible (Danermark et al., 2002). Data must first be interpreted with the help of established theoretical concepts. Constructing categories and their properties, and subsequently the generation of theories, requires an ability by the researcher to draw on theoretical concepts in making inferences. Nonetheless, this does not negate the importance of the notion of emergence, which serves to emphasise that the grounded theory method is not attempting to select data for predefined categories to test theories and hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Adopting a Straussian variant of the grounded theory method and a critical realist perspective, categories emerge from data when I code, make constant comparisons, draw on theoretical concepts, conceptualise, and make inferences.

Secondly, categories are emergent in the sense that, whilst categories with higher levels of abstraction emerge from categories of lower abstraction levels which, in turn, emerge from the data, they have properties which are irreducible to those of the lower level categories or data (Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2000). This critical realist notion of emergence is compatible with the grounded theory method. In fact, Glaser and Strauss (1967) made a related claim about the emergent nature of categories developed in the coding and in the constant comparison process:

It must be kept in mind that *both* categories and properties are concepts indicated by the data (and not the data itself); also that both vary in degree of conceptual abstraction. Once a category or property is conceived, a change in the evidence that indicated it will not necessarily alter, clarify or destroy it. It takes much more evidence—usually from different substantive areas—as well as the creation of a better category to achieve such changes in the original category. In short, conceptual categories and properties have a life apart from the evidence that gave rise to them.
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 36)

Central category: Parents as choosers. I begin my analysis with the central category, as it lies at the core of the research question. All other concepts and relationships discovered and developed from the data are analysed in light of this. Although the impact of the Voucher Scheme has many aspects, this study focusses only on the impact had on parental choice. The relevance and importance of causal conditions, of contextual conditions, and of intervening conditions derive from their impact on parents as choosers and from the course of action and interaction taken by these parents. Thus, other categories having emerged from coding the data are organised to explain the conditions leading to the parents' school choices. We can thereby learn about why parents choose in a particular way, and we can use this to illustrate the process of choice making, including how decisions are reached and what their consequences are, under the Voucher Scheme.

Whilst aiming to study parental choice, I need to first find out if parents have

a choice and, if they do, whether they exercise it or if they delegate it to someone else. As Butler and Hammett (2010, p. 2432) put it, school choice is ‘crucially dependent on the structure of available provisions’ and is seen to ‘operate within a structure of constraints, not least of which is the structure and geography of supply and the mechanisms of allocation.’ Institutionally, Hong Kong has no central place allocation or catchment area in pre-primary education, so institutional constraints on parental choice are relatively limited. All 40 parents interviewed in the study said that they chose the kindergartens for their children and hence exercised choice in selecting the kindergartens for their children. None of these parents attributed the school choice decision to any third parties such as government bodies, employers, institutions, or relatives other than themselves. Some of the parents in the study have made their decisions based on recommendations by relatives or friends, but they nonetheless considered themselves to be the individuals making the choice. Although parents did not always get the schools they wanted for their children and choice was constrained, importantly, none of them said that they had no choice. This study finds that kindergarten parents in Hong Kong do, to a certain extent, have the power to choose and that they exercise it. Accordingly, the central category in this study is *parents as choosers*.

To develop the central category further, and to make sense of how parents choose their children’s schools, I identify key attributes of the concept of parents as choosers. These attributes are called *properties* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I proceed to further put these properties into perspective by delineating their dimensions. Dimensions illustrate properties’ positions along a continuum. Along with other conditions which will also be discussed, the properties of the central category determine the behaviours of parents in making choices. The properties of parents as

choosers are identified from an analysis of the data and are summarised in Table 3; they are *sophistication*, *capacity*, and *gender*.

Table 3

Central Category

Central category	Properties	Dimensions
Parents as choosers	Sophistication	Little consideration contrasts with researching information and thoroughly reasoning or weighing alternatives.
	Capacity	Focussing on short-term considerations contrasts with planning strategically for years into the child's future then acting accordingly.
	Gender	A joint decision contrasts with one made exclusively by the mother or by the father.

Sophistication of parents in weighing alternatives. All parents, to a varying extent, provided some reasoning and explanation for their school choice decisions and for how these were reached. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the data show all parents collecting comprehensive information about schools available to them. Nor does it demonstrate all parents being able to assess such information and weigh the alternatives carefully according to the long-term best interests of their children or other family objectives. The research findings show a large variation in levels of choice-making sophistication. The dimension of sophistication varies: At one end of the spectrum are parents who search for information and who are able to reason and

weigh alternatives thoroughly; at the other end are those who give hardly any thought to deciding on a school. I use the concept of sophistication which emerges from the data, as it provides a wide and continuous dimension of different aspects of choice. In contrast, the more often used but controversial and ontologically embedded typological notion of *rationality* is frequently perceived as binary and is presented as either rational or irrational. Some authors have attempted to use Amartya Sen's capability theory (Kelly, 2007, 2010) or Daniel Kahneman's bounded rationality concept (Ben-Porath, 2009; Kahneman, 2003) to tackle the limitations of the rationality concept in analysing parental choice. However, these ideas are beyond the scope of discussion needed for the purpose of this study. I consider sophistication a more appropriate concept to serve as a subcategory or property illuminating the varying ability of parents to seek information and to justify and weigh alternatives. A position can be achieved without dragging the study into unnecessary debate about the ontological position of 'narrow rational and utilitarian conceptualisations of the chooser' (Ball, 2003, p. 111).

The meaning of *sophistication*, as used in this study, describes how parents make informed decisions. In arriving at these decisions, parents may use a variety of practices and demonstrate varying inclination to search for information and to assess various school choice alternatives. The process is more significant than is the outcome. Some parents from the study demonstrated a low level of sophistication. For example, several parents cited home-school proximity and relatives' or friends' children as being primary reasons for sending their children to schools about which they admitted knowing little. These parents may not have searched for other schools. Sending a child to a nearby school does not, in itself, implicate a school choice lacking in sophistication. There may be good reasons, resulting from search and

deliberation, for such a decision. What is telling is these parents' limited knowledge about the schools in question; they made minimal effort to find out more about these schools or about other nearby schools. There seems to have been a focus on geographical and family logistical convenience, and active effort to exercise choice appears to have been lacking. Such behaviour resembles that of a category which Vincent et al. (2010) called 'default choosers'. For example, I had the following conversation with a parent:

- Respondent: Actually the first criteria were closest to home. We live around the corner, so it's very convenient for us to have [child's name omitted] attended kindergarten over here. Second factor was that most of my wife's friends who have children are studying here.
- Interviewer: Any other reasons?
- Respondent: I did not know the school very well at that time. The first time I heard about it, I asked around and they say it's a good school, so we decided to let her stay here.
- Interviewer: Have you had a chance to look around other schools? What are the characteristics?
- Respondent: No, not really. For kindergarten, no.
- Interviewer: Oh, so have you heard anything about this school before you put in your application?
- Respondent: No, no, absolutely not.
(Parent E1, voucher-eligible school)

Apparently, Parent E1 has made no attempt either to search for information about the school or to weigh different institutional alternatives. In this regard, the parent's choice-making process may be considered to lack a degree of sophistication in the sense of her having failed to undertake a more detailed reflection concerning the school. Also sending her child to a voucher-eligible school within walking distance from home, the following parent demonstrated much more engaged practices and active behaviour in exercising school choice. This deems her a more sophisticated chooser than the parent in the previous example.

I started the search when my child was a little over 1 year old [more than a year before starting kindergarten]. I walked around schools in the

neighbourhood and asked around. . . . I and my husband searched and checked school information over the internet. . . . At the beginning, I looked for schools with a good environment. . . . This school is new and its environment suits our requirements. . . . I went to the open day of another school but found their curriculum was too difficult. . . . I have taken into consideration of transportation because the child is too young to travel to Kowloon Tong [an area with many popular kindergartens but located far from where this family lives]. . . . Besides environment, the education philosophy is most important. The teachers [in this school] teach my child from easy to difficult, step-by-step learning through activities, instead of rote learning. (Parent C2, voucher-eligible school)

The degree of sophistication shown by parents as choosers depends on how they attempt to weigh the alternatives when making their school choices and on the effort they put into this. School choice is a ‘confusing and complex process’ and requires parents have a ‘capacity to engage with and utilise the possibilities of choice’ (Ball et al., 1996, pp. 93-94). In the next section, I look at parents’ capacity to plan strategically. In contrast to the ideas of Ball et al. (1996) and with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the ‘capacity to see’ cited in Ball et al. (1996), I use the term *capacity* in a narrower sense; namely, in connection with the process of strategic parental planning for the child’s future.

Capacity of parents for planning strategically for the child’s future.

Sophistication is one difference noted among parents. Another difference is parents’ capacities for strategically contemplating their children’s futures and possible effects on their children’s futures resulting from choices of kindergarten. The task is a demanding one for parents. School choice is, by its nature, a decision having both a short-term impact on the family and a very long-term impact on the welfare of the child. The short-term impact is easier to ascertain and to assess. The long-term welfare of the child is remote with indirect outcomes being contingent and difficult to contemplate. This kind of inter-temporal choice means making a decision with results not to be seen until a long time in the future. Such a choice is difficult,

especially as the person (in this case the child for whom the decision is being made) is likely to become, over time, increasingly independent from the decision makers acting on his or her behalf. The decision-making process is much more complex than one where consumption serves the immediate satisfaction or utility of the decision maker.

The research suggests that some parents had a greater capacity than others did for strategically planning years into their children's futures and then choosing accordingly. Some parents, meanwhile, had a reduced capacity for contemplating the future and planning ahead. In the latter case, the focus was on short-term considerations. A large number of parents were found to be somewhere in between the two extremes. Consequently, whereas many respondents in the study paid attention to short-term factors such as home-school proximity and their children's happiness, most of them also gave consideration to some factors having enduring impacts on their children. These longer term factors varied among parents. Examples were language and transition to primary school. School choice is not, therefore, an either-or decision for parents. Rather it means choosing from various combinations along a continuum or a matrix of factors. Furthermore, these factors are generalised concepts, at risk of losing the details for each specific case. For example, the notion of happiness within the categories only includes cases in which parents were concerned about the normal day-to-day happiness of their children at school and about whether the children could cope with school life easily. No cases are included that imply fears regarding bullying. This would have a much longer-lasting impact on a child. The following remarks by one parent illustrate the kind of balancing act required for navigating between short-term and long-term factors:

We do not consider vouchers . . . We don't need to give financial factor a high

priority look. Therefore my first priority is whether the school met our needs. Location is my first priority and the second is the mission of the school. . . . We have family planning including a budget for education. . . . We started studying the education system in Hong Kong when our daughter was 2 years old. . . . We thought we need to think carefully what we wanted our children to become. . . . At the same time, we also believe in 'happy learning'. . . . We believe in 'top down education'. We look at education from the top to the bottom, not the other way around. It is because if you work from the bottom to the top, you are focussing on the present, not the future. When you move along to the middle and suddenly find there is no transition between the bottom and the top, you will get stuck in the middle and become very anxious. We work from the top. We first decided where our children will go for university.
(Parent D1, non-voucher-eligible school)

Parent D1 demonstratively gave high priority to happiness of her child, a short-term factor. The parent in question had also considered the child's potential future university education, a long-term factor. The parent demonstrated good capacity for trying to see fairly far into the future, working backwards from university study to early childhood education and taking many factors into consideration. More typically, as per the data, parents looked more for obvious medium-term indicators than they did for attributes in the very distant future. For example, preparing for transition to an elite primary school and excellence in language acquisition were used as shortcuts, or proxies, by many parents. Thereby attempting to secure for their children a path to future success in an uncertain world, these parents took the future into consideration without attempting to plan for it in precise detail; they were satisfied with the proxies. By focussing on primary schools, parents extended the planning horizon step by step. Doing so makes fewer demands on parents' capacities to imagine the future of their children and the world in which those children are going to be living. These parents had their eyes on their children's futures but implemented an incremental approach so as to minimise the demand on their capacities. Thirteen respondents ranked the transition from kindergarten to

primary schools as an important consideration, if not the most important consideration. For example, some parents' remarks were as follows:

A factor which directly influences the choice [of kindergarten] is to which primary schools its graduates can go. Parents [like us] are choosing primary schools [when they make their choice of kindergarten].
(Parent B1, non-voucher-eligible school)

This kindergarten is linked with a primary school to which we want to send my child.
(Parent G2, non-voucher-eligible school)

My child was admitted by two kindergartens [of] which I had to choose one. I wanted my child to get into Primary School P. . . . I asked around the friends and people. . . . I finally picked this school . . . Tuition fee was not my number one consideration. I concerned much more about which primary school he will go to.
(Parent F1, voucher-eligible school)

Cognitive development and other learning outcomes in early childhood education are rather difficult to observe without examination scores available as a reference. Probably because of this, many parents putting higher emphasis on their children's future attainment tended to use language acquisition as an indicator of academic outcomes. Many respondents in this study emphasised that learning the English and Putonghua Chinese languages were key considerations, whereas only two respondents attributed their school choices to academic performance. One parent remarked the following:

. . . Then I look at what my child will learn at school. For example, what languages the school uses to teach, how many of them. If they have only two [languages], I want to know if they teach both languages every day, only once, or twice a week in English.
(Parent H3, non-voucher-eligible school)

After looking at sophistication and capacity, the next property to discuss is the gendered nature of school choice.

Gendered nature of choice. The research reveals that, whilst the school choice process usually involved both the mother and the father, it was the mother

who most frequently played a leading role. For example, 18 of the 40 respondents emphasised that it was the mother who had been largely responsible for making the school choice decision. Even in those cases where both parents participated, it was the mother who was often the most involved and proactive. One parent illustrated such a case:

Of course there was discussion all along but he [my child's father] was very busy in his work. . . . I visited these schools first. He accompanied me to get forms and attend interviews . . . We went together and asked questions. However, I did the research on transportation and the surrounding environments by myself. I prevailed over him and made the decision from the perspective of taking care of our child well. Basically my husband did not have much opinion.

(Parent F3, voucher-eligible school)

I decided together with my husband . . . [but] I did most of the research.

(Parent G1, non-voucher-eligible school)

Only 3 of the 40 respondents said that school choice was left to the father. In two out of these three cases, the mother was not familiar with Hong Kong. Parent A4 was a father who was a local Hong Kong resident. His wife was from mainland China and had recently immigrated to Hong Kong. Parent E2 was a Filipino housewife who had followed her aircraft engineer husband to Hong Kong. In the third case, Parent F5 was a father who was a freelance policy researcher working from home. His wife was an office clerk who went to work every day.

Similarly, Vincent and Ball (2001, 2006) found childcare decisions being made largely by mothers; they suggested that the childcare market is a 'highly gendered market' and that 'the main players in both supply and demand are women' (2006, p. 43). They remarked that

only in four cases [out of 12] did the women describe the decision as a shared one, and in those cases, the women collected all information, drew up a shortlist and made an initial contact. This heavy investment of the mother in the choice process replicates the findings of other research which has studied the gendered nature of choice in compulsory [schooling] and

post-compulsory [education] settings.
(Vincent & Ball, 2001, p. 642)

The data identify a pattern for gendered choice. There are families in which the mother does the decision making and there are families in which the decision is a joint one between two parents; there is no suggestion that notable differences can be found by comparing school choices in these two types of family.

In identifying from an analysis of the data the key properties of the central phenomenon (see Table 3), the study categorises parents as choosers of their children's pre-primary education. In terms of the properties and dimensions associated with this central phenomenon, choices are found to vary in their levels of sophistication and capacity. The mother is often the leading decision maker, and is in many cases the sole decision maker, in the process of school choice. In the following sections, I look at the probable conditions affecting these properties of the central phenomenon. I commence with the causal conditions.

Causal conditions. Using the data, I develop two causal conditions (and their associate properties and dimensions; see Table 4) which shape how a parent behaves as a chooser for his or her child's pre-primary education. The conditions are the motivation and resources which parents have to help them make choices of school for their children.

Table 4

Causal Conditions

Causal conditions	Properties	Dimensions
Motivation	Trade-off	Aiming to enhance the lifelong welfare of a child contrasts with meeting the immediate substantive need of a household.
	Expectations	Expecting a high level of achievement by a child in many areas contrasts with minimal expectations.
Resources	Economic capital	Resources to pay for the expensive tuition fees of selective non-local-curriculum schools contrasts with being able to choose only from nearby schools whose tuition fees are fully covered by vouchers and for which transportation costs are low.
	Cultural capital	Having advantaged positions in knowledge, skills, professions, languages, and the dominant cultures contrasts with a lack of these advantages.
	Social capital	Having good access to useful information and resources through being well connected socially contrasts with having very little access to such information and resources.

Motivation of parents. Although home-school proximity and family logistics are frequently cited as the factors influencing school choice decisions, all parents told me that some factors relevant to the welfare of their children were also borne in mind. Some of these factors were practical considerations relating not so much to the child's future as to the child's immediate welfare. Nevertheless, from the interviews, I was given the personal impression that the parents cared about their children and that they were somewhat motivated to act in the interests of their children's welfare.

Motivation is embedded with trade-offs and expectations. When parents make a school choice, it requires time and resources which could be used for other things also valuable to the household. Moreover, some choices are more convenient in terms of household logistics and are desirable for near-term household welfare. Some other choices are more costly or inconvenient in both a financial and a non-financial sense but may offer better potential educational benefits to a child in the long run. Such trade-offs partly account for the level of motivation parents have in exercising school choice for the long-term welfare of their children. Parents' motivation to exercise choice is also affected by the expectations they have for the future achievements of their children, by the likelihood of their children gaining admission to their preferred schools, and by differences in educational outcome of different schools.

A household's near-term practical situation sometimes pushes parents' consideration of their children's welfare to the backseat. This is illustrated by the high percentage of parents in this study who cited home-school proximity as a top consideration. Furthermore, parents heavily engaged with other household tasks were found to not invest the time necessary for thorough research and careful analysis. An inadequate level of sophistication and capability were thus exercised in

the decision-making process. One parent's remarks were as follows:

During the time my husband was very busy, that is why we didn't . . . we haven't had the chance to talk about how is the process, how is something . . . He is the one who fixed it all . . . because during the time I was still pregnant.
(Parent E2, voucher-eligible school)

The research findings suggest that parents having low expectations for their children's futures are sometimes also likely to have a low level of motivation for engaging in the performance of their duty as choosers for their children. For example, Parent H2 could afford to send her child to a non-voucher-eligible private independent school, and she did so. Nevertheless, Parent H2 showed a low level of sophistication and capacity in her choice-making process, not being motivated to engage in a wider search for a suitable school due to her low expectations. Subsequently, she based her decision on home-school proximity, on freedom from unwanted academic pressure on her child, and on ethos and happiness. The following quote signifies her approach towards choosing a school and sheds light on her modest expectations concerning her child's future:

My husband told me not to choose those schools pushing too hard academically or those requiring keen competition or examinations. What he said is correct. We were not graduates of elite schools ourselves. Anyway, as long as [our child] grows up as a good person having a job and working regularly, it will be fine.
(Parent H2, non-voucher-eligible school)

The parents in the above example were not motivated to perform with sophistication or good capacity their roles as choosers, because they had low expectations of their child's ability to cope with competition and of the child's potential for future achievement. Besides motivation, how parents act as choosers is affected by the resources that they possess or lack. The property of resources is the subject of the following section, and the case of Parent H2 is analysed further in terms of the influence of resources.

Resources. The sophistication and capacity of the parents' choices is further complicated by the significant differences in their endowment of resources. Resources help parents to make informed choices from the options available and to contemplate the futures of their children. These resources also allow an understanding of those choices that facilitate the futures to which parents aspire for their children. Finally, parents with resources can inform themselves regarding funding for and access to preferred schools. These resources are productive, exclusive, and cumulative; and they take a long time to accumulate. Some of these resources are financial, some are cognitive, some involve knowledge, some are cultural, and some are based on social ties. Parents need these resources to produce desirable results in making choices. To categorise the various resources into concepts of explanatory power, I borrow the concepts of economic, cultural, and social capitals from the thinking tools of Pierre Bourdieu (1986). The notions of economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital are helpful. They delineate with the appropriate dimensions properties of the category of resources. They also lend explanatory power to the central category of parents as choosers. Nonetheless, with a grounded theory approach, this study focusses only on concepts that emerge from the data and on notions, from the existing literature, which can facilitate comprehensive understanding of the concepts from the data. Hence, application of Bourdieu's (1986) thinking tools is limited: The concept of *capital* is used here, with *habitus* also used in a later section. However, the complete box of Bourdieu's (1986) basic thinking tools includes, besides capital and *habitus*, the concepts of *practice*, *field*, and so forth. For discussion of these other thinking tools and of their application in educational research, readers are referred to the work of other researchers (Grenfell, 2009; Grenfell & James, 1998, 2004; Mills, 2008; Mills & Gale, 2007; Nash, 1990;

Rawolle & Lingard, 2008; van Zanten, 2005). Later on in the chapter, I address the much criticised tendency towards social determinism embedded in Bourdieu's notions of *habitus* and capitals. I complement the analysis of the study using the notion of reflexivity, with parents as *individual agencies* making strategic choices and conscious decisions (Archer, 2003, 2010; Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010; Sayer, 2010b).

In the following way, I use the concepts of economic, cultural, and social capitals as Bourdieu (1986) described them:

Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e. exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour. . . . Capital, which, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible. And the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the imminent structure of the social world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the changes of success for practices . . . Capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights; as cultural capital . . . [which] can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods . . . and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. . . . Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 46-51)

In school choice, parents as choosers are influenced by the resources at their command. In other words, the amount and types of economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital possessed by parents contribute to how parents behave as choosers. Parent H2 could afford non-voucher-eligible schools, meaning that she had a fair amount of economic capital. She also had relatively adequate cultural capital: Her

child's father was a product designer with a mechanical engineering degree. However, Parent H2 and her husband were relatively deficient in social capital. Whilst being interviewed, they mentioned repeatedly that they wanted to avoid elite kindergartens and primary schools, and they said that they themselves were not graduates of elite schools. Their modest expectations for their child's future achievements may have been related to this lack of social capital. Their unfamiliarity with elite and higher achieving schools made them feel uncomfortable about these schools, and this might have exaggerated their idea of the difficulties involved in sending their child to such a school.

Similarly, for Parent E2, economic capital and cultural capital are unlikely to have been constraints, as the father was an engineer working for an airline company. Speaking no Chinese and being from an ethnic minority may have weakened somewhat these parents' cultural capital position. More importantly, there was a lack of bridging social capital which could otherwise have given them access to heterogeneous horizontal social networks. Linking social capital (Bagley, 2009, 2011; Gewirtz, Dickson, Power, Halpin, & Whitty, 2005), which could otherwise have given them access to resources and information outside their immediate social networks, was also lacking. There was clear influence from these factors, which were likely to have been the most important ones constraining their choice. The parents in question did not conduct an extensive search; instead they quickly reached a decision to send their child to a nearby school attended by the children of many fellow Filipinos working for the same airline company.

In another school, School A, parents from all five families interviewed had no university education and were people neither holding professional or corporate managerial jobs nor owning large businesses. In four of these families, one or both of

the parents were immigrants who either had recently arrived in Hong Kong or were non-Hong Kong residents. In one mainland Chinese family, the mother travelled between Hong Kong and mainland China on a visa every week to accompany her Hong Kong-born child going to school in Hong Kong. These parents' lack of resources including economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital, in some ways shaped their school choice decision-making process. All five families cited vouchers as an important consideration and as making a significant contribution to family budget. Transition to primary schools, philosophy and pedagogy, and the reputation of the kindergarten were considerations which these five families did not mention. The aforementioned three factors were, however, very often cited by respondents from families with more resources; they are factors which benefit children more in the long term. In contrast, some of these families in School A cited hygiene and air ventilation as an important consideration. Factors like this, concerning very basic necessities, were never mentioned by respondents with more resources and were probably being taken for granted. This may be related to differences likely to exist between families' living conditions. Parents in School A remarked

I chose this school because it has good air ventilation, and it is clean . . . because that means less illness for children . . . The other schools are poorly equipped and are in commercial buildings or malls without windows . . . so no fresh air.

(Parent A2, voucher-eligible school)

I chose this school because its campus is big and spacious . . . It reduces the chance of infection and allows more exercises.

(Parent A5, voucher-eligible school)

The data suggest that families with less cultural capital did not have the capacity to contemplate future education and career path in as sophisticated a manner as did the more advantaged families. They appeared less able to assess the factors of

educational philosophy and pedagogy. For reputation, they may not have been aware that, or did not expect that, their child could gain admittance to certain schools.

Other variables that these families tended to put forward as important factors included home-school proximity, campus, small class sizes, loving and caring teachers, freedom from unwanted academic pressure on their children, and quality of teaching. Two parents mentioned English, but they were comparing the situation with study in mainland China. When they talked about campus, they were referring to decreased chance of sickness because of a spacious campus rather than to any demand for good facilities for educational purposes. Many of these factors are related to present practical considerations rather than to children's future welfare.

Sophistication and capacity were demonstrated by parents, as choosers of their children's schools, to varying degrees. The level of sophistication and capacity (central category), influenced by the motivation and resources (causal conditions), characterises parents in the analysis of my findings.

During this process, the external environment intervenes to mitigate the impacts of such attributes, referred to in the paradigm model (Figure 5) as *intervening conditions*. It is to these intervening conditions that I next turn.

Intervening conditions. Three intervening conditions (see Table 5) are identified as affecting the parental school choice process the most: diversity, the Voucher Scheme, and accessibility. These intervening conditions are interrelated. In the following discussion, I address their properties, aiming at generating explanations and gaining understanding of phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This is particularly important, because the introduction of the Voucher Scheme in 2007 affected the other two intervening conditions greatly. As the intervening conditions concern the general structure of the environment and the institutional

setup more than they concern the specific situations of individual parents, a substantial amount of data from government documents and literature are used to supplement the findings from the 40 interviews.

Table 5

Intervening Conditions

Intervening conditions	Properties	Dimensions
Diversity	Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Child centred · Comprehensive and well balanced · Academic focus
	Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Play-based instruction · Direct instruction
	Medium of instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Chinese · Bilingual · English · Other foreign languages
	Mode of operation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Half day · Full day

Table 5 (continued)

Intervening Conditions

Intervening conditions	Properties	Dimensions
Voucher Scheme	Eligibility of school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Eligible schools must be non profit making, be subject to capped tuition fees, follow the Government's local curriculum guide, and use Cantonese as the medium of instruction.
	Coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Universal · Non means tested
	Quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Self evaluation · External quality review
	Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Key operating details easily available to the public · Information not provided

Table 5 (continued)

Intervening Conditions

Intervening conditions	Properties	Dimensions
Accessibility of desired schools	Affordability	· Expensive fees · Fully subsidised
	Place availability	· Sufficient to meet all demand

Diversity of schools. Kindergartens in Hong Kong are diverse in curricula, in pedagogies, in media of instruction, and in modes of operation. Diversity in the range of schools between which parents may choose tends to increase their motivation to invest time and effort into making a school choice; the educational outcomes can be very different, and the implications for the household may vary. When the product is not homogenous, differentiating factors cease to be limited to price and geographical distance, and the product itself becomes a differentiating factor. Significantly, the notion that all schools are equally able to produce similar educational outcomes does not apply in Hong Kong. Consequently, as schools are structurally different, there is more is at stake in the choice of school.

The Curriculum Development Council of Hong Kong set out a *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* for kindergartens to adopt as they see ‘appropriate and with due consideration of their own circumstances and needs’ (Curriculum Development Council, 2006, p. 4). Besides areas of learning, learning objectives, teaching strategies, and assessment methods, the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* stipulates that kindergartens should use Cantonese as the medium of instruction. Only those kindergartens which adopt Cantonese as the medium of instruction are

classified by the Education Bureau as local kindergartens. The rest are classified as non-local kindergartens. At the beginning of the 2009/10 school year, 92% of the 950 kindergartens in Hong Kong were local kindergartens (EDB, 2011).

Voucher Scheme as the key intervening condition. This distinction between local and non-local kindergartens was not material in the past, because it had few practical implications for the kindergartens, for parents, or for children. Nevertheless, this dramatically changed after the introduction of the Voucher Scheme in September 2007, as the Scheme stipulates that only kindergartens which have adopted a local curriculum are eligible to redeem vouchers. Non-local schools are not eligible. By choosing English, a bilingual combination of English and Cantonese, a bilingual combination of English and Putonghua, or another foreign language as the desired language for their children's schooling, parents lose voucher eligibility for their children. The Voucher Scheme therefore increases the relative price of choosing languages other than Cantonese, and makes choice of language inseparable from financial considerations. For example, 10 respondents in the study opted out of the local-curriculum kindergartens, citing learning English and Putonghua as important factors. Some said they did not pay much attention to tuition fees. However, some did, and they wished, in fact, to redeem a voucher. One parent commented on the trade-off:

It is important to learn Putonghua nowadays . . . My child may have to work in mainland China when she grows up . . . Though I wish to choose voucher-eligible schools, however, I sacrifice it by picking a school which puts emphasis on language learning with Putonghua, English, and Cantonese. I have declined the offer of another school because of the medium of instruction. There is no Putonghua and English at the pre-primary level . . . only Cantonese.

(Parent B3, non-voucher-eligible school)

Besides its impact on the relative price faced by the parent in choosing between languages as the preferred medium of instruction, the Voucher Scheme makes less desirable and more costly substantial deviations from the Government's *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* by local kindergartens. In the past, the Government put forward a set of common performance indicators for self-evaluation by kindergartens and conducted random inspections on kindergartens covering curriculum, teaching approach, and school administration. However, these were purely for advisory purposes, and kindergartens used them for reference only (Poon, 2008). However, with the launch of the Voucher Scheme in September 2007, the Education Bureau started a 5-year cycle to let its own review teams conduct on-site reviews in kindergartens so as to validate the self-evaluation report done internally by the respective school. After completion of the 5-year initial review cycle in the 2012/13 school year, the Voucher Scheme allowed continued voucher redemption only by kindergartens with school self-evaluation reports successfully validated by the Education Bureau's quality review. Voucher-eligible kindergartens were also now required to submit a school report and a school plan at the beginning of every school year (EDB, 2007; Poon, 2008). This new quality assurance mechanism brought about greater pressure to observe the recommendations of the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum*: Two of the four domains of performance indicators in the school self-evaluation, namely Learning and Teaching and Children's Development, are subjects of the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum*. Failing to pass the quality review under the quality assurance mechanism and inability to improve accordingly leads to a subsequent loss of voucher eligibility. As of the 2009/10 school year, 84% of kindergartens had joined the Voucher Scheme and were subject to the internal self-evaluation and quality review by the Education Bureau (Education Commission,

2010, p. 18). The implication was that these 800 voucher-eligible schools were then effectively governed by the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum*, which had played a merely advisory role in the past. One consequence was the tendency towards reduced diversity in the range of schooling available to parents.

As the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* proposes a child-centred approach, a comprehensive curriculum gives balanced attention to a child's cognitive, linguistic, physical, affective, social, and aesthetic development; to use of Cantonese as the medium of instruction; and to a play-based learning strategy (Curriculum Development Council, 2006, pp. 26, pp. 40-41). Such prescription could mean that some parents with alternative preferences may have found themselves obliged to give up their vouchers in order to send their children to schools with alternative curricula and pedagogies. Significantly, this study, for example, finds that Cantonese's use as the medium of instruction was often the reason for parents to reject voucher-eligible schools. Parents preferred a bilingual combination of English and Putonghua.

Some parents from my interviews, although a relatively much smaller number of them, expressed concern about the implications of the Voucher Scheme imposing restrictions upon curricula. A child-centred, comprehensive, and well-balanced curriculum with a play-based learning approach, as suggested in the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum*, was generally acceptable to most respondents in this study. Nevertheless, some parents expressed concern and wanted more focus on academic achievement. Parent B1 was an example of one such parent:

Private independent schools are better . . . because the schools being governed by the Government want to get rid of examinations. I am not sure, but I think assignments are important. Those government schools [voucher-eligible schools], may not be as good in academic. This is my guess

but I am very sure about languages.
(Parent B1, non-voucher-eligible school)

The *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* puts little restriction on the specific pedagogies as long as they do not conflict with the principle of learning through play rather than through direct instruction. The Voucher Scheme's introduction also put no restriction on mode of operation, and both half-day and full-day schools were made eligible. The impact of the Voucher Scheme in reducing diversity by requiring eligible schools to offer a local curriculum was mostly felt, from parents' perspectives, in its exclusion of English and Putonghua as the primary teaching languages in the Voucher Scheme. The Voucher Scheme therefore effectively links choice of language closely with financial considerations for many parents with relatively modest family budgets.

The Voucher Scheme makes another significant intervention in parents' school choice structural environment: It increases the relative cost of choosing private independent schools, and the numbers of private independent schools available to parents are reduced. Following the launch of the Voucher Scheme in September 2007, 114 former private independent kindergartens, accounting for 12% of all kindergartens in Hong Kong, had converted into non-profit-making kindergartens and had joined the Voucher Scheme by the 2009/10 school year (Education Commission, 2010, p. 18). These kindergartens were therefore required to adopt the local curriculum and to become subject to closer supervision by the Government. Besides private independent schools, some non-profit-making kindergartens charging tuition fees exceeding the cap prescribed in the Voucher Scheme are excluded by the scheme. This would continue to be the case even if these non-profit-making kindergartens adopted the local curriculum. Again, we see the

Voucher Scheme intervening in the pre-primary education market and changing the relative price between choices. One parent from this study gave up her child's eligibility for the voucher so that she might choose a non-profit-making kindergarten charging tuition fees in excess of the cap imposed by the Voucher Scheme. She commented

I was so happy when I learned about the Voucher Scheme, and my child was at the right age going to school. I remember that I watched educators discussed about the scheme in open forum on TV, and they mentioned vouchers and free kindergarten education. I called my husband immediately to let him know . . . but when I learned later that private schools are not eligible [she was unable to distinguish non-profit-making schools charging tuition fees in excess of the prescribed cap in the Voucher Scheme from private independent schools, but the effect of non-voucher eligibility was the same for her] . . . I was excited at the beginning and thought schooling would be cheaper but only to find out it was not for me; because when I chose a school, I based my decision on the quality of the school and did not put voucher eligibility at high priority . . . My feeling was that private schools are ever better.
(Parent G5, non-voucher-eligible school)

The Voucher Scheme requires that kindergartens provide their key operating data in the school profiles at its portal. Kindergartens must also consent for the Education Bureau to publish this data. The disclosure includes voucher eligibility; names of key management; number, qualifications, and salary ranges of principals and teachers; student enrolment; schools' facilities and activities; curriculum details; schools' characteristics; tuition fees and other charges; and schools' expenditure information for every voucher-eligible kindergarten (EDB, 2007). The Voucher Scheme increases the transparency of school information to parents. In the interviews, many respondents said they browsed these school profiles on the internet to gather information about teacher quality, school characteristics, and other information. Parents also have, at their disposal, the Education Bureau portal, featuring school profiles for non-voucher-eligible schools. However, these profiles

contain less information, because non-voucher-eligible kindergartens are not obligated to make such disclosures.

In the 2010/11 school year, the number of enrolments in kindergartens was 101.5% of the kindergarten school-age population of 3- to 5-year-olds (EDB, 2012b, p. 197). The number could be over 100% because some kindergarten students were more than 5 years old at that time. Hong Kong parents generally consider that sending their children to kindergarten is important. In the 2006/07 school year, the year before the launch of the Voucher Scheme, kindergarten was not compulsory and was not yet subsidised by the Government, as this only changed in 2007. However, kindergartens were attended by 96.3% of the population of kindergarten school age (Education Commission, 2010, p. 15). None of the parents interviewed in this study said that they would not have sent their children to kindergartens had they not been given a voucher. Nonetheless, 10 of the 20 voucher-eligible school parents being interviewed said that vouchers were an important consideration. Some parents commented on the way in which their family budgets had been helped. The following parents provide examples of such cases:

To us, it [the voucher] is very important . . . It saves more than a thousand each month and enables us to spend more money on children, family.
(Parent A1, voucher-eligible school)

You may not think so, [but] we, lower income people, would be much better off being given one thousand dollar more. If having one thousand dollar less, I may really need to go to find a job . . . [and] have to leave my child in the care of my mother or a relative. It would mean a lot of difference in the educational outcome of my child. (Parent A2, voucher-eligible school)

School accessibility. In Hong Kong, the number of kindergarten places available in 2009/10 was 186,626. This number was 33% higher than the total number of students enrolled.¹ These statistics suggest that kindergartens in Hong

¹ Data obtained from a phone call by the author to EDB on 7th March 2011.

Kong are not in short supply and that there are more than enough places for parents to choose between schools. However, there is no guarantee that parents are allocated their school of choice. Kindergartens in Hong Kong are selective in admission. There are no catchment areas or central place allocations for pre-primary education. Even after joining the Voucher Scheme, a kindergarten has complete autonomy in student admission. In aggregate, there is a surplus of kindergarten places. However, those in the desired schools of parents are in shortage and have to be rationed by non-price competition. The following parent applied for eight schools; but her child had offers from only three kindergartens which, however, did not include the two schools which she wanted most. The parents could afford a non-voucher-eligible school and eventually sent their son to a school with a similar tuition fee level. Price was not the issue, but they apparently did not possess the cultural capital to know how to search properly or to succeed in non-price competition. The mother remarked as follows:

[We applied to] seven or eight schools . . . all were in Kowloon Tong . . . my friends told me to find schools there. They said at least other people would recognise the names of my child's school if he went to study in Kowloon Tong. We live in Shum Shui Po [an old inner city area where low-income families and people from South Asia reside]. Going to school there is not good. But I don't really know how good the schools in Kowloon Tong are. Only three offered a place . . . Of course I wanted him to go to [school name omitted] or [school name omitted] because my friends said you did not have to worry [about primary school] if your child went to one of these kindergartens. . . . I have not done anything to prepare him for the interviews. We really have not. Although we really like these schools, we sort of just wanted to see how it went . . . My husband said let's just took our son to the interview . . . [but] whether he would get an offer was beyond our control . . . How the interview would be like? We had no ideas when we first got there. (Parent G3, non-voucher-eligible school)

For most families in Hong Kong, pre-primary education was affordable even before the launch of the Voucher Scheme. In aggregate, Hong Kong has a more than sufficient number of kindergarten places to accommodate the needs of all children from 3 to 6 years old. However, this does not mean that there is no competition for

places in some schools. Admission can be selective and gaining admittance to elite kindergartens difficult. Some parents use price to compete by paying high tuition fees for places in elite private independent schools. At the schools topping most parents' lists of preferences, there is a scarcity of places, and the supply of places is inelastic. Elite or reputable schools do not expand the quantity of places supplied. There exist resource and structural limits as well as an inclination to cream skim for students deemed desirable (Butler & Hamnett, 2010; Contreras, Sepulveda, & Bustos, 2010; Epple & Romano, 2008; Musset, 2012; OECD, 2012). Price competition cannot clear the market, and rationing by non-price competition plays an important role. Families' cultural capital and social capital therefore become instrumental in determining whether the parents really have a wide range of choice or if, rather, they can choose only from what is left over.

Intervening conditions mitigate and modify actions and interactions of parents as choosers (central category). These, in turn, are influenced by causal conditions. This is the primary flow of causality and is illustrated by the thick lines in Figure 5. At a secondary level, intervening conditions also inform the central category and casual conditions (see the thin lines in Figure 5). Structural factors are external and general, and they are referred to as *intervening conditions*. Similar to these are *contextual conditions* (see Figure 5). Contextual conditions describe the specific context for an individual family's situation, and they modify parents' actions and interactions for school choice. In the next section, contextual conditions of the school choice process are discussed.

Contextual conditions. The significant contextual condition identified in the data is the family background of the respondents. From my analysis of the data, I have identified the properties associated with family background: ethnic group and

socioeconomic status (see Table 6). These are the only two clearly significant emergent categories. Although religion is often found to be a significant factor in accordance with the school choice literature overseas (Denessen et al., 2005; Kelly, 2007; Kristen, 2008), the analysis of data in this study does not suggest religion to be an important consideration in school choice for Hong Kong's parents. Religion was mentioned by none of the respondents as a factor for consideration in school choice, the exception being one non-Christian parent who suggested that she considered Christianity to be an indicator of loving teachers (Parent C1, voucher-eligible school). Likewise, composition of the family and gender of the child were also not mentioned by respondents as important factors for consideration.

Table 6

Contextual Conditions

Contextual condition	Properties	Dimensions
Family background	Ethnicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Hong Kong Chinese · Mainland Chinese · Asian minorities · Caucasian
	Socioeconomic status	These range from high to low, based on income, education, and profession.

Ethnicity. Although child attributes, family composition, and parents' religious beliefs are found to be unconnected to the central phenomenon of parents

as choosers, the data shows a strong clustering pattern of families from the same ethnic groups. A Filipino parent remarked

. . . so we all, if you notice, there are so many Filipinos in this class.
(Parent E1, voucher-eligible school)

In School E, besides Parent E1, three other parents interviewed were Filipino and the fifth was Sri Lankan. All Asian minority parents being interviewed in this study were from School E. Another common characteristic of all five families in School E was that one of the parents in each family was working for the same airline company. School E was near the Hong Kong International Airport. Similarly, all mainland immigrant families in this study were found in School A. For School A, in four out of the five families being interviewed, at least one of the parents still lived in mainland China or had recently moved to Hong Kong from there. The findings in this study show that minority families tend to send their children to the same schools as others within their circle. This finding echoes the notion of *community choosers* (Vincent et al., 2010) and *circuits of schooling* (Ball et al., 1995) evidenced in previous studies. The sense of *getting by* (Ball et al., 1995) was strong for three Filipino families in School E. These parents did not search for schools, and simply sent their children to a nearby school where many other Filipino families were also sending their own children, even though some of the parents were university graduates and engineers. The fourth Filipino family and the Sri Lankan family did some research on a few other schools, but the criteria they appeared to use in assessing schools seemed less sophisticated than many local families'. There was no mention of any consideration given to transition to primary schools, to pedagogy and philosophy, or to moral education. Home-school proximity, learning Chinese, and campuses were main concerns. The opportunity to learn Chinese is a long-term

strategic consideration and explains the lack of search for an English-speaking school, but it cannot by itself reflect a high level of sophistication in choosing a particular school. All voucher-eligible schools are asked by the Government to adopt Cantonese as the medium of instruction.

The clustering of students from the same ethnic groups was also likely, because some local families from the study rejected these schools in order to avoid their children going to school with peers from newly immigrated families or from other ethnic groups. One local-family parent in School A expressed concern about sending her child there and described the social pressure she had experienced regarding this:

Space, teachers, the principal, and all staff are enthusiastic but the quality of the students varies . . . There are many new immigrants [from mainland China] in the school. They are rather, er . . . speak with strong provincial accents. They are all like that. . . I am okay to the peer students but my family does mind. My younger sister was particularly against this when I sent my child here. Many of my friends also told me not to do that because the quality of students there was so poor.
(Parent A5, voucher-eligible school)

Socioeconomic status. Families with lower socioeconomic status said that the voucher was an important consideration. They also often gave high priority to home-school proximity, to campus layout, and to a loving and caring environment. None of them talked about transition to primary schools as being a factor worth considering. The perspectives of this group of parents varied markedly from those of a higher socioeconomic status group of parents in another voucher-eligible school, School F. All of the five respondents in School F said the voucher did not matter. In fact, the principal claimed she had to encourage parents to complete the voucher application forms; she even completed some parents' forms herself in order to persuade them to apply for vouchers. The principal said many of the parents in her

school did not really care about the availability of vouchers and were not inclined to accept them. In school choice strategies, this group of parents gave high priority to primary school transition, to philosophy and pedagogy, and to reputation. Very few gave any consideration to home-school proximity, to campus, or to love and care. In this regard, data analysis suggests that parents' socioeconomic status demonstrated a connection to the central phenomenon of being choosers.

In the analysis of data, family background emerges as the contextual condition. Through its two key properties, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, family background influences parents' actions and interactions, which are analysed in the next section.

Actions and interactions. Actions and interactions (Table 7) represent how parents handle the central category of being choosers under the influences of causal conditions, of intervening conditions, and of contextual conditions. Parents collect information about schools and act strategically.

Table 7

Actions and Interactions

Actions and interactions	Properties	Dimensions
Collecting information	Source	- Between cold and hot - Between narrow and extensive
Acting strategically	Building a future	Combining educational outcome orientation and future focus
	Having a happy childhood	Combining educational outcome orientation and present focus
	Getting by	Combining family-consideration orientation and present focus
	Being like us	Combining family-consideration orientation and future focus

Collecting information. The 40 respondents all showed motivation to collect information as part of their school choice processes. However, there was variation among respondents concerning the sources upon which they relied and concerning

the extensiveness of their searches. Some parents relied completely on the recommendations of relatives or friends and did not collect information from other sources. The following are examples of such cases:

I came [to Hong Kong] once in August . . . but I had learnt before that my sister-in-law had had three children [who] studied in School A. She recommended School A to me and I thought I needed no further search.
(Parent A1, voucher-eligible school)

It was according to friends' comments, in other words, friends told us which schools they had sent their children to and found these schools good. We, from the beginning to the end, relied on friends. We asked around which kindergarten was good . . . We applied to two schools . . . We only looked at the schools from the outside . . . [but] did not read any materials or attended any talks . . . Both of them admitted our child. . . I chose the one strongly recommended by my friends.
(Parent B4, non-voucher-eligible school)

Whereas only 7 respondents considered the opinions and recommendations from their friends and relatives an important factor in their decision-making, 27 respondents said they obtained some sort of information from friends or relatives. The opinions and recommendations, although not determining factors per se, might have influenced parents' perception and interpretation of other factors which they considered important. For example, Parent F4 emphasised quality of teachers, academic results, and moral education as being important factors. Her strategy to collect information about these factors was obtaining advice from parents who had children going to school in that area.

We live in this area. I asked people living nearby and parents who had older children which school was suitable for boys. This school is very reputable in this area, particularly for boys . . . and the quality of teachers, curriculum. . . . I listened to what these people said. They thought children graduated from this school had received good academic and moral education.
(Parent F4, voucher-eligible school)

In the typology of Ball and Vincent (1998), this type of information, obtained from social networks and localities, is referred to as *grapevine knowledge* or *hot knowledge*. With the sharp increase in the internet's social penetration since the time

of Ball and Vincent (1998), many parents from the study extended their sources of hot knowledge beyond their social network in the traditional sense of physical localities. Through the internet, many of these parents gathered information from online forums and connected with a larger but specialised network of online communities, which were, in some cases, more heterogeneous than were the parents' social classes. These online forums are used by parents who are usually mothers and who come from all kinds of backgrounds. On the forums, information is shared about child caring and about schools. Such information is not formal. It is based, rather, on personal experience or sometimes on hearsay, and the information is exchanged between forums users who have never met each other. The internet has greatly extended the grapevine of some less well-connected parents.

I read [school] guidebooks and then searched on the internet. When I was in full time employment, I knew very few mothers who had toddlers. The only way was to go to the forum on the web to ask the opinions of other mothers . . . It was Baby Kingdom. I came to know some mothers, all from the web and [whom I had] never met. All sharing was done on the internet. We talked about how to take care children and how to choose schools. Everyone talked about these, because they were the major issues of concern. Everyone talked about how to choose a school.
(Parent C1, voucher-eligible school).

The tendency to seek hot knowledge was attributed by Vincent and Ball (2006) to the dominance of women making the choices in pre-school childcare:

The importance of women's social networks, the giving and seeking of personal recommendations, and opinions from friends and family, what we have called elsewhere 'hot knowledge'. . . Hot knowledge cuts through marketing presentations to the heart of the matter, 'can I trust my child with this person, this organisation'?
(Vincent & Ball, 2006, p. 43)

Formal information distributed by schools and by the Government is called *cold knowledge*. Kindergartens do not have any league tables, but the Education Bureau posts the Quality Review Summary Reports for individual voucher-eligible

kindergartens on its website, where parents and prospective parents can review it. However, these reports are available only in Chinese, not in English. Kindergartens which do not join the Voucher Scheme are not required to go through continuous quality reviews as the voucher-eligible schools are obliged to do. Therefore, there are no such Quality Review Summary Reports available for non-voucher-eligible schools. Some non-profit-making, non-voucher-eligible schools have their Quality Assurance Inspection Summary Reports on the Education Bureau site, but these reports are from prior to the launch of the Voucher Scheme. Nonetheless, the Education Bureau has posted school profiles, both in Chinese and in English, of every voucher-eligible and non-voucher-eligible kindergarten in Hong Kong. The profile includes voucher eligibility, basic statistics about facilities, teachers and students, tuition fees, curriculum description, school characteristics, and links to school websites. For voucher-eligible schools, the profile includes statistics about the salary and experience of teaching staff and about the expenses of the school, but such information is unavailable for non-voucher-eligible schools. The Education Bureau website and individual schools' websites are the major source of cold knowledge.

There was much information on the internet. I browsed kindergartens' websites. . . . I considered the quality of teachers very important so I searched their website . . . and found their teachers' experience and quality were not bad.

(Parent C1, voucher-eligible school)

My husband helped me search the web together, to investigate if the kindergarten was suitable for our child, based on the information provided in the school's website.

(Parent C2, voucher-eligible school)

Are the facilities sufficient? I could find the answer on the web.

(Parent F5, voucher-eligible school)

Parents also cite several publications which provide formal information as well as having taken into account recommendations and opinions from educators and parents. These publications are somewhere in the middle of the continuum, between hot and cold knowledge.

I bought a school guidebook. . . . I read each school listed in the book carefully.
(Parent H5, non-voucher-eligible school)

Parents are to act strategically as choosers equipped with information collected from research, under the influences of causal conditions, of intervening conditions, and of contextual conditions. The following section studies parents' strategies.

Acting strategically. Besides collecting information, the data shows that parents adopted various strategies. Some strategies were relatively simple and straightforward, and others were more sophisticated and subtle. I introduce some of these strategies in an earlier section of the chapter. In this section, the aim is to investigate the details further and to analyse parents' school choice strategies systematically. Through constant comparison, concepts are integrated into the category of acting strategically. Strategies are grouped under four properties: *building a future, having a happy childhood, getting by, and being like us*. Such categorisation is based on the interaction of the two dimensions for each of these properties. These two dimensions are *orientation* and *time focus*. *Orientation* dichotomises between being *educational outcome orientated* versus *family consideration orientated*. *Time focus* includes *future focus* and *present focus*.

To visualise the dynamics of how individual strategies are integrated into each of the property categories as a result of their positioning amid the interaction of orientation and time-focus dimensions, I use a strategy quadrant diagram (Figure 6). The quadrant diagram summarises various parental school choice strategies and their

categorisation into one of four properties on the spectra of two dimensions presented in dichotomy. The purpose of the quadrant diagram is to position strategies rather than parents. A parent may choose strategies from more than one quadrant and may adopt an eclectic approach in adopting strategies from different quadrants.

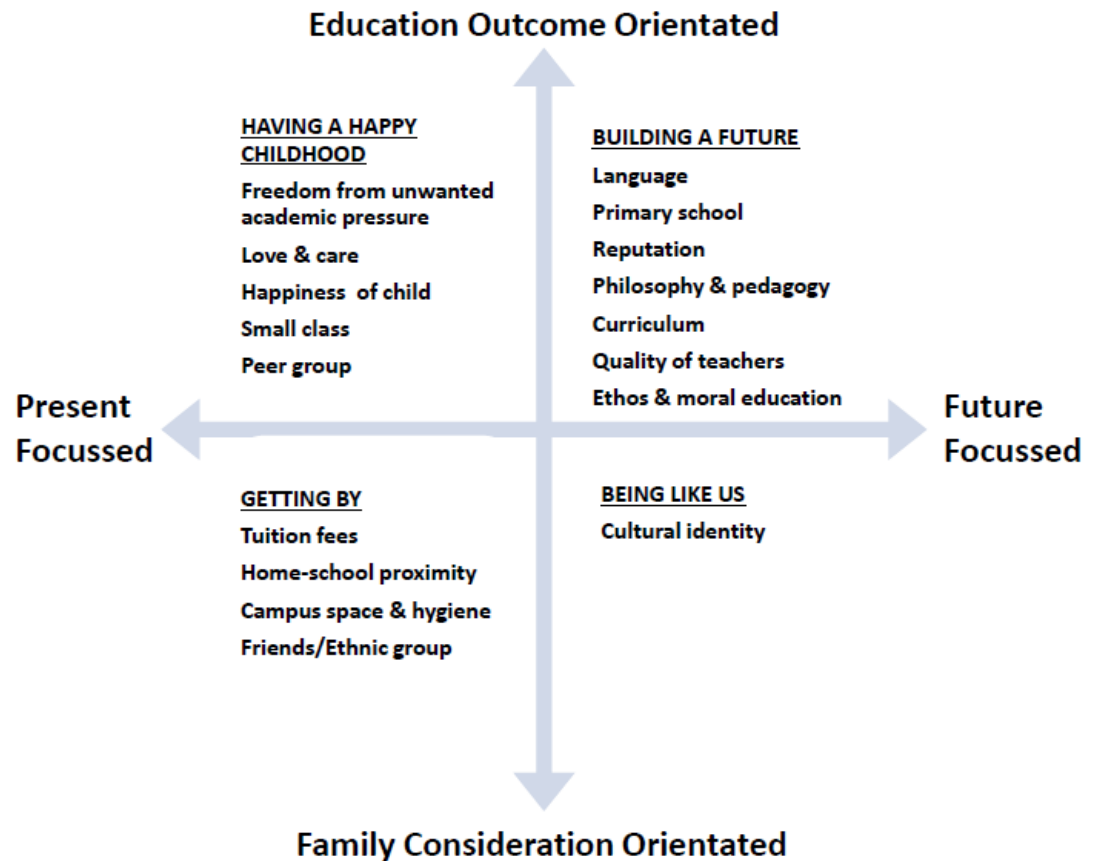


Figure 6. Strategy quadrant diagram.

In the following sections, I discuss in turn each of the four properties and their strategy subcategories with reference to their positioning in the strategy quadrant diagram.

Building a future. The upper, right-hand-side quadrant in the strategy quadrant diagram (Figure 6) is a group of combinations of the educational-outcome-orientated dimension and of the future-focussed dimension. I name the property category of these strategies *building a future*. In contrast with

other strategies, *building a future* represents strategies which are most related to children's futures. These strategies include the following: language, primary school, reputation, philosophy and pedagogy, curriculum, quality of teachers, and ethos and moral education.

Language acquisition is clearly a long-term educational outcome. Most of the respondents who emphasised the importance of learning Cantonese Chinese, the local language, were ethnic minorities. They were probably more focussed on their children's lives and future employment in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Chinese parents, however, stressed their desire to have their children learn Putonghua Chinese, mainland China's official language, which is not widely spoken in Hong Kong. These parents apparently took it for granted that the local Cantonese language would not be an issue for their children, as it was usually the mother tongue and was the language spoken at home. In these cases, the parents favoured Putonghua Chinese, though it was neither spoken in their homes nor often used in their communities. Such parents had their eye on the more distant future and on their children's future employment potential, including professional and business opportunities in mainland China. Most of these parents who favoured Putonghua also wanted their children to learn English in kindergarten. Many chose private independent schools with a non-local curriculum and with both Putonghua and English as the primary media of instruction. These parents opted out of the voucher-eligible, local-curriculum schools particularly because of language strategy.

Both [school name omitted] and [school name omitted] have vouchers. Then why I didn't choose them? I did not go there for the voucher to begin with anyway. I went to School [name omitted] to take a look because their campus environment was good. I also found the teachers very caring. The only problem was that I did not like the fact that they use Cantonese. They teach everything in Cantonese and only have one or two lessons in English and

Putonghua every week.
(Parent H4, non-voucher-eligible school)

The kindergarten in [street name omitted] has a very favourable Quality Review Report. Comments are good. But why I didn't choose that school? It was all about whether they were bilingual. In this society, or looking at the future trend, Putonghua is a must. You must be proficient in listening, speaking, reading and writing in Putonghua. . . . You also cannot lag behind in English. . . . Very few people among the 1.4 billion Chinese are bilingual and we shall make use fully the unique advantage Hong Kong enjoys in education.

(Parent D2, non-voucher-eligible school)

One mainland family considered better English language education in Hong Kong as one of the major reasons for them choosing to educate the child in Hong Kong rather than in China. Neither of the parents were Hong Kong residents. However, their two children had the right of abode and citizenship in Hong Kong. The mother deliberately came to Hong Kong to give birth, partly to sidestep the one-child policy in China. The father continued to work and live in China. The mother and children stayed in Hong Kong on school days, returning to China during weekends and school holidays.

We were afraid that our children could not catch up in English when they moved on to primary school.
(Parent A1, voucher-eligible school)

One Hong Kong Chinese mother and her American-born Portuguese husband had previously relocated to Hong Kong from the United States. Their decision to do so was attributed partly to their wish that an environment be provided in which their child might learn Putonghua and written Chinese. More on the subject of language acquisition is discussed later in this chapter when we analyse how parents formulate strategies.

As discussed in the section on parents' sophistication in weighing alternatives, quite a number of parents targeted primary schools when they chose kindergartens. Places in elite or reputable primary schools were highly competitive.

Therefore, parents who aimed for these schools hoped to cultivate non-price-competitive advantages by sending their children to kindergartens whose graduates possessed good track records of gaining coveted primary school places. These parents planned their strategies several years ahead. Some kindergartens had institutional links with reputable primary schools, and many of these kindergartens' graduates attended those primary schools. For example, School G was operated by a university which also has a primary school and a secondary school. School F was run by the Anglican Church, which also operated many elite primary and secondary schools and which had a history of getting some of its graduates into these primary schools. All respondents from School F, and most of those from School G, told me that transition to primary schools was their strategy for choosing kindergartens.

Some parents, in choosing a school, relied on the perception of reputation. When talking about reputation, some respondents linked it to track records for pupils' transitions into elite primary schools. In the absence of admission statistics and of public examination results, parents, to a large extent, judged the track record of graduates' transitions to primary schools by researching the reputation of a kindergarten.

Interviewer: How did you choose between these two schools?

Respondent: School F. It is an elite school . . . Reputation has influence on me. I heard about the school . . . We were choosing a school but we had never studied there and had not been in touch with the school before. We did not know the teachers. Therefore, we must listen to what people said about the school that gave me an impression that School F's graduates could get into good primary school.

(Parent F3, voucher-eligible school)

Some other respondents were less specific about the meaning of reputation; they spoke in a broader and more general sense about searching for reputable schools. Some further elaborated that they associated reputability with good teaching,

whereas some said that, if a school has a long history and has always been reputable, it must be a good school. A strategy of choosing a reputable school can be based on the reputation itself as a virtue. Alternatively, reputation can be used as an indicator for other factors that the parents desire but are less able to research directly.

Another popular strategy revealed is parents seeking a school with an educational philosophy and pedagogy appealing to them. Sixteen respondents said that they took into account philosophy and pedagogy. Some also mentioned the mission, value, or culture of the school as being important. After more detailed discussion, they revealed that what they meant by educational philosophy, mission, culture, and value were mostly pedagogy related. Therefore, I categorise all of these under one strategy of philosophy and pedagogy.

There are now new education philosophies, such as stimulating children's interest to learn, not forcing them to memorise a lot. I wanted to choose a school like that.

(Parent D4, non-voucher-eligible school)

Their philosophy of thinking every child being unique has given me a very deep impression.

(Parent F5, voucher-eligible school)

Parents also looked for their preferred type of curriculum. Some favoured a multi-intelligence curriculum, whilst others wanted early training in writing Chinese characters. Some insisted on considering only local-curriculum schools. These parents thought that, after attending international curriculum kindergartens, their children would not have the option to return to the local system and continue schooling in local curriculum primary schools. Some parents looked for schools using the International Baccalaureate programme ('IB'), and yet others purposely sought to avoid IB schools. Parents' preferences were diverse.

Education normally requires pushing the child a bit. I don't want to push her, but at the same time don't want to let her behind the average too much. . . . I like IB because it is the trend. Education is very different nowadays.

Information explodes and the world has become globalized. You are not competing in your own region but with the whole world. Creativity is very important. The traditional schools have constrained creativity, so I don't want local school model.

(Parent D3, non-voucher-eligible school)

I don't want an IB kindergarten. It has too little framework for my child. I want a syllabus. . . . I want traditional instruction methods. IB school teachers will not give instructions but ask the children to investigate . . . My husband is a medical doctor. He thinks children shall grow up with traditional schooling so that they can study professional degrees in Hong Kong and feel more at ease then. If the child is asked to investigate on everything, he will become only suitable to continue schooling in overseas.

(Parent F3, voucher-eligible school)

More than a quarter of the respondents told me that the quality of teachers ranked highly in the school choice strategies they used. Nevertheless, most of these respondents did not specify what they meant by teacher quality. After further questioning, a few mentioned the ratio of teachers holding degrees, and two parents considered the kindergarten's affiliation with the early childhood and elementary education division of a university to be indicators of good teacher quality. Due to the importance of Putonghua and English language to some parents, some respondents gauged teachers' quality by whether or not they were native speakers of a language.

Parents remarked the following:

My husband liked to browse the web . . . about the quality of teacher . . . About 90 plus per cent of teachers in this school had early childhood education training. He said no other schools in the Northern region could achieve that.

(Parent C3, voucher-eligible school)

I prefer international class with native language teachers . . . Language learning is very important. . . . Hong Kong is an international city. . . . I want my child to learn English and Putonghua.

(Parent B1, non-voucher-eligible school)

Several respondents used foreigners as an indication of quality. By using the term *foreigners*, they generally referred to white Caucasians, as they expressed displeasure with Indian English teachers. However, they did not seem able to

distinguish whether a white teacher was a native English speaker or not. Hong Kong has a long colonial history and, arguably, there is racial discrimination. In the case of Caucasians, this tends to be positive discrimination, whereas, for non-whites (except for fellow Hong Kong Chinese people), it tends to be negative discrimination. Parent B1 probably did not want to sound racist: Whilst voluntarily bringing up the race issue, she alluded to the preferences of other parents, rather than to her own regarding this. Parent B3, another parent from the same non-voucher-eligible school, said she liked School B because there were always many foreign English teachers in the school. She mentioned how, in the morning, two Caucasian women stood at the school's front door greeting students and parents. Although this strategy is focussed on educational outcome, the indicators which parents used to perceive teaching quality were not necessarily sophisticated.

Some parents related quality to general impressions regarding teachers: teachers' cheerfulness, their professionalism (in the sense of devoting all working time to pupils), their verbal conduct, and their ability to keep their work separate from personal issues. Parent C3 said that she disliked teachers preparing food for children using unwashed hands and wearing no gloves. Parent B5 used, as an indicator of good teacher quality, an example of what she considered to be good demeanour, where children at a school were taught to push back their chairs.

Parents also looked for schools with a good ethos and moral education. These parents wanted to make sure that their children would grow up with a good character and with integrity. To ensure as much, some parents, even those not themselves religious, sought out Christian schools, associating Christianity with superior moral education. Others relied on recommendations and information obtained from the internet or from acquaintances.

I considered the ethos of a school as the most important.
(Parent C4, voucher-eligible school)

Of course I want his academic results being strong. Nevertheless, I think moral education and character building are more important than academic knowledge. If you have only academic results but not a good character, you may become a thief in the future.
(Parent D1, non-voucher-eligible school)

The *building a future* category of strategy is somewhat similar to what Ball et al. (1996) called 'goal-orientated/objective perspective'. Nevertheless, the notion of building a future requires no objectivity and has a more explicit demand for long-term focus than does the goal-orientated/objective alternative. In fact, it is difficult to delineate the level of subjectivity or objectivity when parents assess information, interpret alternatives, and formulate strategies: There is frequent blending and inseparability. For example, teacher quality has both a subjective and an objective perspective, as discussed earlier in this section.

Having a happy childhood. The strategies grouped in the upper left quadrant represent combinations of the educational-outcome-orientated and present-focussed dimensions. These include use of obvious indicators for certain features: caring principals and teachers who demonstrate a love of children, children being happy at the school, small class sizes allowing for as much individualised attention as possible, freedom from unwanted academic expectations by which pupils might otherwise suffer, and peer group influence that appears to be positive. These factors are involved in strategies collectively referred to as *having a happy childhood*. Ball et al. (1996) suggested that not all privileged and skilled parents focus on a goal-orientated/objective perspective; many do adopt a person-orientated/subjective perspective. Likewise, Woods et al. (1998) proposed two value perspectives: instrumental-academic and intrinsic-personal/social.

The importance of the intrinsic-personal/social aspect of schooling for parents is grounded in the fact that the parental viewpoint tends to be orientated around the child as a person: the capabilities, fears, ambitions, likes and dislikes, friendships, emotional nature, sensitivities, strengths and weaknesses of the growing person in their midst, and his or her friendship. (Woods et al., 1998, p. 171)

Fifteen respondents in this study mentioned teachers' caring approach and love of children as factors for consideration. Similar to the findings of Vincent and Ball (2001) in the U.K., some Hong Kong kindergarten parents are looking for more than just education. They want someone to treat their children lovingly. Love and care mostly affect a child's immediate welfare and near-term learning outcome.

Respondents made the following remarks:

Whether teachers are loving . . . of course, I have not yet had any child studied there yet [at that time]. I relied on the word of mouth. . . . I think the school is important but the teachers' love is even more important. This is particularly true at this early stage of growth; the child knows very little and is like a blank sheet of paper. She absorbs everything you teach her. So if the teachers are loving and empathetic, she will be more positive in character. This has a large impact on a child.
(Parent C4, voucher-eligible school)

I have thought about [changing school] . . . but frankly speaking, I quite like this school. This is because I have made reference to other schools, to which my friends sent their children. I found this school can take care of children better.
(Parent H3, non-voucher-eligible school)

Vincent and Ball (2001, p. 643) emphasised the gendered nature of parental choice, saying mothers in particular seek to 'personalise the transaction, to build relationships with the providers, to emphasise the affective.' My study suggests that mothers are usually the primary decision makers in choosing a kindergarten. Nevertheless, this study draws no conclusion on the notion of gendered inclination towards the desire for love and care.

Another simple strategy used by parents was to see the happiness of their children as an indicator for the present state of welfare of the children and for

near-term educational outcomes. For the parents, this indicator was relatively easy to observe and to ascertain. It was apparent for quite a number of parents, in conflict with the iconic Chinese ‘tiger mother’ image portrayed in the popular book by Amy Chua (2011), that they considered happiness as a desirable educational outcome per se and adopted simple strategies to look for schools in which they believe their children would be happy.

To choose a school, I was looking for good campus, the environment, whether it is suitable for children and if the children there are happy or not.
(Parent A5, voucher-eligible school)

I chose to have her stayed in this school because I thought my daughter would be happier here. Although academic is important, the sense of belonging, whether she enjoys or is happy . . . are factors of consideration. I found she was happy in this school so I let her stay here.
(Parent B1, non-voucher-eligible school)

I first checked the background of the school and then checked if the children there were happy or not. I also paid attention during each interview to whether my daughter was happy.
(Parent B5, non-voucher-eligible school)

To ensure that their children remain happy at school, some parents purposely avoided schools that emphasised academic achievement so as not to have excessive academic pressure placed on their children.

Elite schools assign much homework and put higher pressure on kids. I want my child to grow up in an environment with less pressure so I went for [not the elite school but] the slightly above average schools.
(Parent A4, voucher-eligible school)

Another school had an introduction session. A speaker told the parents not to worry and repeatedly ensured that children studied there would be pushed hard in learning English at very high standard and would pass so and so tests . . . but those were not what we wanted. All we want is to have our child being relaxed and happy in the few years of kindergarten.
(Parent G3, non-voucher-eligible school)

As an indicator of the level of individualised attention and care their children might receive at school, some respondents used a strategy of looking for schools with small class sizes and of avoiding large schools or schools with large class sizes.

I like fewer students in a class. Hence teachers can pay attention to students and their individual progress and then teach them accordingly. They will also be able to notice immediately anything happened to the children.
(Parent A4, voucher-eligible school)

[I didn't send my child to that school], because I went inside the school and saw plenty of people. The toilet is like . . . a whole building was a toilet; girls went in from one side; boys from the other side . . . Many kept going in and many kept coming out continuously. The school was too big and gave no sense of family. I like School B, it is smaller.
(Parent B3, non-voucher-eligible school)

Some parents emphasised the importance of peer group at school. Several respondents, when asked to specify what they meant by peer group, said they avoided schools located inside public estates. Public estates in Hong Kong are government-owned residential properties rented to low-income families. Being cautious not to sound politically incorrect, they made sure I understood that it was not wealth or income that mattered but that some children in those schools behaved badly or came from families with 'bad' parents.

When I went to those schools in public estates, not because I was biased, there were all kinds of parents there. Some of them were really bad. I couldn't imagine how they could educate their children, they were really bad. I don't think a child is born good or bad. It is up to the parent to educate the child. There are good students in bad school. I understand. But if I can choose, within the mean of my family, I will eat less and have less clothing, in order to give my child something better in schooling. . . . If you compare the experience of visiting a playground at public estate and a playground at the Peak, you would find they are completely different. I know because I did both. Those kids in the public estate pushed and hit other kids. On the other hand, in a playground in a better area, kids shared.
(Parent B5, non-voucher-eligible school)

Like some other parents cited in my previous section on the Voucher Scheme as an intervening condition, Parent B5 felt her family budget was tight, and she wished to redeem a voucher. However, she wanted 'better quality' of education for her child, and she considered peer group as a determining factor of the quality. She decided against choosing voucher-eligible schools. When talking about peer group, some other parents were less specific about whether the schools they wanted to avoid

were located in public estates. Nevertheless, all parents who considered peer group important made reference to other parents and families of the school as indicators of the desirability of the peer group. When respondents talked about peer group influence, none of them referred to spill-over effect on academic results. They all focussed on manner and behavioural indicators as the marker of peer group influence.

Building a future and *having a happy childhood* are both categories of strategies considered to be educational outcome orientated. In the following two sections, strategies with family-consideration orientation are considered.

Getting by. A second group of strategies, which has a short time horizon under consideration, is put together in the lower left quadrant. The main difference between this group of strategies and the *having-a-happy-childhood* strategies is that the former focus more on the needs of the family rather than on the educational outcome of the child. These school choice strategies involve the following: home-school proximity, tuition fees, campus space and hygiene, and attending the same schools as friends and relatives. Because of their focus on family considerations in the present, rather than on educational outcome or longer-term considerations, in the typology of Ball et al. (1995), I call them *getting-by* strategies.

Twenty-two of the 40 respondents considered home-school proximity in geographical distance to be an important factor. Out of all the school choice strategies, home-school proximity was the second most frequently mentioned one. As per the discussion in the chapter's previous sections, the relative importance of the home-school proximity strategy in the school choice decision was influenced by the sophistication, capacity, motivation, and resources of the parents, as well as by the background of the family. Although many respondents listed home-school proximity as a strategy, not all of them were getting by in their school choices

overall. Some of these respondents simultaneously adopted other strategies which focus on educational outcome and have longer term horizons. The four-quadrant diagram refers to the strategies, not to the parents. Parents, from time to time, adopted a combination of strategies, which may come from different quadrants. Nonetheless, some parents may have concentrated on one quadrant of strategies. For example, Parent A3 gave a strong impression of getting by without much thought about longer term factors or educational outcome.

I browsed for a few schools on the internet and then walked around a bit in the area near our home. I only applied to this school. . . . I live nearby and my mother, who lives with us, takes care of my child. . . . It would be difficult for her if the school was far away. This is for pragmatic consideration. I am really busy.
(Parent A3, voucher-eligible school)

Parent A3 concentrated her strategies in the *getting-by* quadrant. Besides home-school proximity, affordability of tuition fees was her other top priority. She would only consider voucher-eligible schools. She also mentioned that the large campus and cheerful teachers of the school attracted her. However, home-school proximity and very low tuition fees due to voucher eligibility were the dominant strategies.

Twenty-four respondents said tuition fee cost was one factor being considered. Nevertheless, only 14 respondents said voucher eligibility was an important factor. Quite a number of respondents said tuition fees mattered, but that they could afford to pay up to a certain amount and were willing to do so. They therefore did not devote much attention to voucher eligibility. In other words, as long as the tuition fee was not excessively high, some parents would not consider trading for the voucher other school attributes desired. However, even though they said they did not pay attention to voucher eligibility, it did not mean that these parents all sent

their children to non-voucher-eligible schools. Voucher eligibility's failure to constitute a deciding factor does not imply any strategy for avoiding voucher-eligible schools. In fact, four of these parents sent their children to voucher-eligible schools and five sent their children to non-voucher-eligible schools. As mentioned in the section on socioeconomic status as a contextual condition, School F is a voucher-eligible school. However, none of the respondents from this school told me that vouchers mattered. Parents chose School F because of its reputability and because of its good track record in helping graduates to gain admittance to elite primary schools.

Among the 14 respondents who said voucher eligibility was a factor to consider, 4 of them sent their children to non-voucher-eligible schools. As revealed by their actions, these four parents had other factors to consider and let those strategies, rather than voucher eligibility, dominate their choices. Parent B3 is an example of this kind, as quoted in the section on the Voucher Scheme as the key intervening condition.

Checking to make sure of an acceptable or good campus was a strategy adopted by 17 respondents. Most, but not all, of these parents were concentrated in three voucher-eligible schools. As discussed in the prior section about resources as a causal condition, there was a higher tendency by certain families towards relying on the condition of the campus as a school choice strategy: Those families were ones who fewer resources, who had lower social and economic status, who had recently immigrated, or who belonged to an ethnic minority. Such parents were looking for space and hygiene, and they related these factors more to health and safety than to educational outcome.

Whilst many respondents sought information from friends and relatives about

schools, most respondents were looking for facts and opinions. They did not intentionally adopt a strategy of sending their children to the schools of their friends' or relatives' children. However, one group of Filipino respondents apparently gave more consideration to the fact that friends' children were studying at a particular school. These friends and their children were also Filipinos. It is interesting to note that, even though they claimed that they wanted their children to learn more Chinese languages, these parents sent their children to schools where the children could choose to associate with fellow Filipinos and could use English or Filipino languages. These parents, belonging to a minority group from a developing country, might have paid more attention to whether or not their children were made to feel welcome in a school. Having many Filipinos attending the same school might have helped to reassure them in this respect. It may be relevant that teachers in School E were perceived by parents as being particularly friendly to minorities, fulfilling parents' desire for a loving and caring school.

I bring along my daughter. I observed my daughter if she likes the kindergarten or the facilities, and talking to the teachers there. I also let my child talk to the teachers. Then, when I felt that some teachers were not so approachable and not so friendly to the children, I felt that it was not good to send her to that school because we were striving first for the adjustment, for the new environment, especially for my child. So the priority to look for the right kindergarten is a friendly kindergarten to my child . . . Teachers [in this school], they are very nice, they can speak all English and so friendly, so caring to the young ones . . . They are very caring to non Chinese [like my daughter].

(Parent E4, voucher-eligible school)

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, parents did not adopt strategies only from the same quadrant, but they selected and combined strategies from different quadrants. For example, all minority respondents in School E said letting their children learn the Chinese language was an important factor influencing the decision not to send their children to international kindergartens but instead to

schools adopting the local curriculum. Parent E2 was one such example:

Since we are based here, even if I and my husband don't know how to speak Chinese, my priority is that my daughter should learn the local language, if we will be staying here. Because it is very difficult if she doesn't know even conversational Cantonese as we already don't know.

(Parent E2, voucher-eligible school)

Being like us. In addition to hoping for their children to grow up with integrity and with good moral standards, parents from the study wanted their children to reproduce their family's cultural identity. Several respondents adopted a strategy of selecting schools which would ensure a Chinese-culture learning environment. I put this type of strategy in the lower right hand quadrant and call it *being like us*. Vincent et al. (2010) suggested a possible explanation for some families' strategies:

Others 'like us' are sought out in the process of choice both as a means of instrumental reassurance and as an expressive reaffirmation of social ties and social identities.

(Vincent et al., 2010, p. 294)

These parents stressed the importance of their children keeping the traditional Chinese moral standards and culture. It was more than just the Chinese language that they bore in mind: It was the culture and value system of their family and community. This was often the reason some families could financially afford international schools but chose to send their children to local-curriculum schools or non-local-curriculum schools with strong emphasis on Chinese language and culture.

Take the following parents' remarks, for example:

The culture is totally different. My family is Chinese. So well, it is hard to adopt two cultures. . . . I am a Chinese and my husband is Chinese. I don't prefer picking an international school.

(Parent B1, non-voucher-eligible school)

We want our child to grow up as a traditional Chinese. It will suit our family better. We don't want our child to go to international kindergartens.

(Parent F4, voucher-eligible school)

My husband does not want our son to grow up speaking only English and has no sense of the traditional Chinese moral codes.
(Parent F2, voucher-eligible school)

The actions and interactions performed by parents as choosers bring about consequences which are the subject of the next section, completing the discussion of the paradigm model.

Consequences. The paradigm model is constructed to analyse the findings grounded in the data of this study of the Voucher Scheme's impact on parents' school choice. We can look at the data from many angles, including variations in causal conditions, contextual conditions, and intervening conditions; but the research question of this study directs us to focus on the impact of one intervening condition, namely the Voucher Scheme, and to utilise the paradigm model for systematically investigating such impact on school choice. The roles of other conditions are important but auxiliary to the investigation surrounding the Voucher Scheme.

In Table 8, I have grouped together key consequences of parents' actions and interactions in the context of the Voucher Scheme. The two categories used are *empowerment* and *segregation*.

Table 8

Consequences

Consequences	Properties	Dimensions
Empowerment	Choice set	Between having many choices and having few choices
	Information	Between having plentiful access to key school information and having no such access
	Strategy migration	Moving between quadrants of strategies
	Outside the box	Between multiple extracurricular activities and few extracurricular activities
Segregation	Two-tier market	Choosing between voucher-eligible and non-voucher-eligible schools
	Conformity	Between homogeneity and heterogeneity
	Non-price competition	Levels of acquisition and utilisation of resources
	Stigma	Between integration and resistance

Empowerment. The Voucher Scheme empowers lower income families by expanding their set of feasible school choices, as there are now more schools to which they can afford to send their children. It also empowers parents with more information easily available about schools. It empowers parents to migrate among strategies in the four-quadrant diagram. Furthermore, some lower income parents are empowered to go outside the box of school choice and to enrol their children in extracurricular activities outside regular schooling.

Empowerment by making more choices affordable. The Voucher Scheme reduces, by the value of the voucher, the effective tuition fees payable by parents. With that, more kindergartens become affordable to parents with modest incomes. There is empowerment for parents in the reduction of schooling's cost at a very large number of schools: The choice set of kindergartens is widened for many people. A ceiling is imposed on tuition fees at kindergartens eligible for voucher redemption on pupils' behalf. The Voucher Scheme thereby aims to prevent kindergartens from raising tuition fees and avoiding passing on the full benefits to parents. Exceptions exist in some cases, where schools originally charged tuition fees far below the ceiling stipulated under the Voucher Scheme (Ming Pao, 2007a). On the other hand, an inducement to reduce tuition fees is given to schools which charge slightly higher tuition fees than the Voucher Scheme ceiling and which have difficulties in enrolment. They become voucher eligible and are able to attract more students, because quite a number of parents consider only voucher-eligible schools. One such example is given:

Kindergartens had been the most expensive schooling in the past. The tuition fee was a large part of family expenses. When we had the voucher, we were very happy. Of course we chose only among voucher-eligible schools. We will not choose any non-voucher-eligible school . . . Voucher-eligible schools usually do not charge much. After the voucher redemption, it is just

HK\$1,000 or several hundred. It is affordable. In the past, some of these schools charged over HK\$2,000. Now with voucher subsidising, we have more choices.

(Parent A5, voucher-eligible school)

Good! We had a reduction in tuition fees [because of vouchers]. Family financial burden was lessened. We have three kids. We redeem vouchers.

(Parent C3, voucher-eligible school)

As mentioned in the section on the Voucher Scheme as the key intervening condition, 12% of kindergartens in Hong Kong have, since the launch of the Voucher Scheme, converted from being private independent schools to being non-profit-making schools, and 84% of kindergartens were voucher eligible as of the 2009/10 school year (Education Commission, 2010, p. 18). Parents with low and modest incomes are particularly empowered, being enabled to afford choosing from a larger number of schools. The Voucher Scheme has no means-test requirement, and families which could qualify as wealthy or middle class may also choose to redeem vouchers. However, the financial impact from voucher redemption is insignificant, so the empowerment in financial resources has the largest impact on families with low or modest incomes.

Disempowerment by weakening the efficacy of economic capital. When the introduction of a scheme is able to empower a particular group, there is hindrance to other groups' relative positions in the spectrum of power. After 84% of kindergartens in Hong Kong (Education Commission, 2010, p. 18) joined the Voucher Scheme, comparatively well-off parents had weakened their competitive positions for voucher-eligible schools. After voucher value gets taken into account, the tuition fees payable become so low that most families can easily afford them. Disempowerment follows for those who can no longer rely on privilege in economic capital to give them competitive advantages in most schools. The number of private independent schools went down following conversion by many into

non-profit-making, local-curriculum schools in order to attain voucher eligibility; there was a corresponding reduction in the set of choices providing a clear competitive advantage based on ability to pay.

Empowerment by making information available. Besides its impact on the size of the choice set and on competitive advantage based on the ability to pay, the Voucher Scheme is also designed to empower parents: It does this by providing them with information about schools so as to improve their sophistication and capacity in school choice. The Voucher Scheme requires voucher-redeeming kindergartens to provide continuous updates of operating statistics to the Education Bureau, which posts them on its website for the public to view. The Education Bureau, in addition to posting operating statistics, also posts on the Education Bureau portal the results and summary report of the Quality Review. This review is carried out by the Education Bureau on each voucher-eligible school, and the information is open for public inspection. In general, parents lacking cultural capital have less personal knowledge and experience of schooling. In addition to the fact that they frequently lack linking social capital, they also lack a social network offering access to such knowledge beyond their community. All parents benefit from the enhancement introduced by the Voucher Scheme in transparency of school information, but there is specific targeting of parents who are choosing among voucher-eligible schools: Voucher-eligible schools are required to disclose more than are non-voucher-eligible schools.

Among the parents from this study using the internet to research information, voucher-eligible school parents tended to utilise cold knowledge about schools, whereas non-voucher-eligible school parents focussed, albeit not exclusively, on hot knowledge from forum discussion about schools. All in all, the Voucher Scheme

empowered parents who possessed less cultural and social capital, because it gave them easy access to additional cold knowledge about voucher-eligible schools. Some of these parents, although not all of them, made use of this additional knowledge to bridge the gap which had previously given them a disadvantage in comparison with more privileged families having better access to knowledge. Some parents, however, did not take full advantage of such information. For example, the ethnic minority parents in School E did not cite as a source of information the school profiles posted in the Education Bureau portal. These parents relied mostly on comments from friends and co-workers, supplemented by school visits in person.

Empowerment enabling strategy migration. With the empowerment resulting from increasingly affordable choices and from more available information, the Voucher Scheme enhances the lower income and less advantaged parents' sophistication and capacity in the school choice process. There is mitigation of the damaging effects imposed by constraints on economic, cultural, and social capital. With that, parents migrate among the strategies illustrated in the strategy quadrant diagram. For the lower income parents, adopting strategies becomes a two-step process. They first select the strategy for choosing among voucher-eligible kindergartens. With the empowerment brought about by resources, these parents can then give more consideration to other strategies which they prefer. As the data from this study show, these parents migrated to other strategies within the *getting-by* quadrant as well as to strategies in the *having-a-happy-childhood* quadrant and in the *building-a-future* quadrant (Figure 6). For example, most parents in School A and School C (both of which were voucher-eligible) first decided to choose only from the pool of voucher-eligible schools, then they applied strategies unrelated to tuition fees during the second stage of the school choice process.

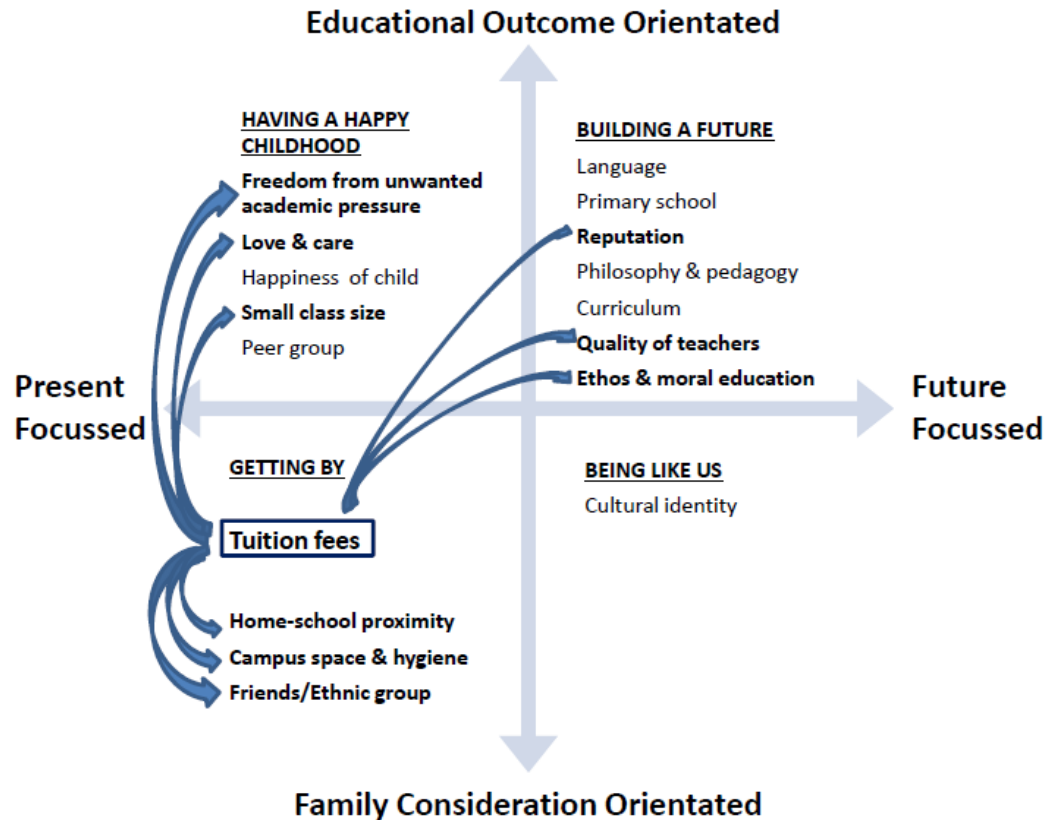


Figure 7. Strategy migration of less advantaged parents.

Strategy migration does not mean that parents completely abandon a tuition-fee-based strategy in favour of other strategies. Figure 7 illustrates what happens when less advantaged parents with lower incomes are empowered, by the Voucher Scheme, with better resources: The tuition fee strategy ceases to be the only dominant one which applies. These parents, increasingly, can combine other strategies for their choices. I do not claim that, without a Voucher Scheme, parents like these would fail to adopt strategies separate from tuition fees. I merely suggest that the data and analysis indicate empowerment rendering tuition fees less of a determining factor for choosing a kindergarten from among a large selection of

voucher-eligible schools. Various combinations of alternative strategies are subsequently adopted by parents.

Even with vouchers, these less advantaged parents maintained a relatively strong sense of getting by in their strategies: They looked for home-school proximity, campus space and hygiene, and friends and people from their own ethnic group attending the same school. Some also selected *having-a-happy-childhood* strategies: They sought loving and caring teachers, small class sizes, and freedom from unwanted academic pressure on their children. Overall, however, these strategies were less frequently adopted than were the group of *getting-by* strategies. Some parents from lower income and less advantaged families expanded their strategy selection to the *building-a-future* quadrant. However, they focussed on the reputation of the school, on quality of teachers, and on ethos and moral education. Meanwhile, parents with more resources tended to pay more attention to language as medium of instruction and to transition to primary schools. As the language used as the medium of instruction is grouped together with voucher eligibility, these parents were not empowered to choose a language other than Cantonese. Some schools with impressive track records of sending graduates to elite primary schools are voucher eligible. However, there is a shortage of places in these voucher-eligible kindergartens favouring transition to desirable primary schools, and parents' rationing relied on criteria other than tuition fees. Furthermore, less advantaged parents may not have had the necessary cultural capital and social capital to find out available alternatives and ways of competing for such desirable voucher-eligible schools. Even with the Voucher Scheme, strategy migration is constrained by cultural and social capital.

Going outside the box. Parental empowerment resulting from better resources for lower income parents arguably had an impact beyond school choice, facilitating family engagement in more diversified educational activities (see Figure 8).

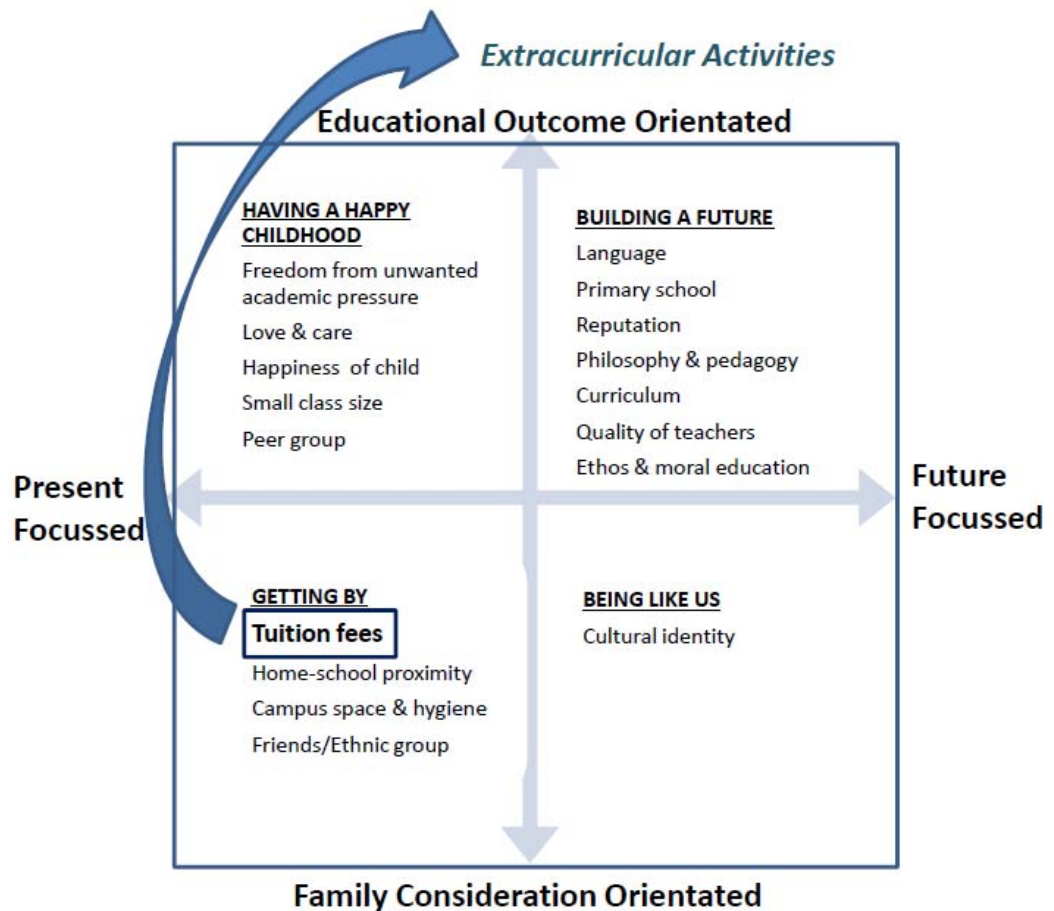


Figure 8. Going outside the box.

For example, a number of lower income families reported that money saved from school tuition cost reduction with vouchers was spent on extracurricular activities for their children. The Voucher Scheme helped reduce the pressure on family budgets and improved the affordability of activities otherwise unaffordable for lower income families. Five parents at voucher-eligible schools said the availability of vouchers

made extracurricular activities more affordable to them. The following parents remarked on this:

It helps. At least I can spend the additional money from the voucher to pay for the child to learn other things . . . Now I send her to learn abacus mental maths, drawings and English . . . All three together costs about HK\$1,000 a month . . . Just spent all the money from the redemption of voucher.
(Parent C4, voucher-eligible school)

I can spend on another class [of extracurricular activities] . . . because it's good that I get some money, because piano is HK\$600 per month. It's expensive. If this is a very expensive school, I don't think my husband will allow.
(Parent E5, voucher-eligible school)

The data show that the Voucher Scheme empowered mainland Chinese people to send their Hong Kong-born children to study in Hong Kong. News reports (Ming Pao, 2007b) and my own observations at the China-Hong Kong SAR border have permitted me to learn of the daily commute made by many children from mainland China in order to attend kindergartens in Hong Kong. In the school year 2006/2007, before the launch of the Voucher Scheme, government statistics recorded 797 cross-border students in kindergartens in Hong Kong. In the school year 2011/12, there were 5,708 children who lived in mainland China and crossed the border daily to attend kindergartens in Hong Kong (EDB, 2012b, p. 68). I conjecture that the Voucher Scheme might make attending Hong Kong kindergartens more affordable for mainland Chinese families whose children, having been born in Hong Kong, become eligible for the scheme. Detailed analysis of this effect will be the subject of future research.

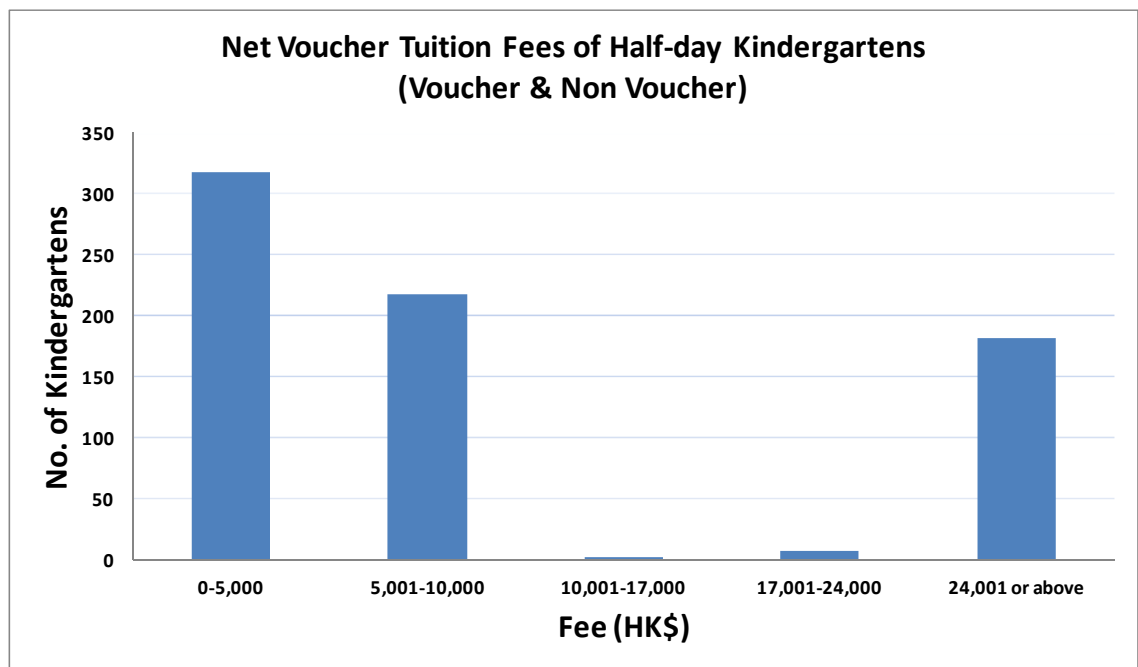
Segregation. Although the Voucher Scheme empowers some parents, it increases the segregation between parents choosing voucher-eligible schools and parents choosing non-voucher-eligible schools. Following the introduction of the voucher, scattering along a continuum is no longer seen in tuition fees effectively

payable by parents choosing different kindergartens. Schools are segregated into two distinct clusters. In the four quadrant diagrams from Figure 7 and Figure 8, strategy migration and going outside the box can only explain the actions and interactions of the less advantaged parents who are empowered with more resources. There is no explanation of the circumstances experienced by some middle-class parents. Before the launch of the Voucher Scheme, parents like these were choosing from around the middle of the school continuum. Afterwards, this choice was no longer possible.

Segregating the market into two tiers. The 2010/11 school year saw voucher-eligible schools costing parents between nothing and HK\$10,000 per annum for half-day programmes or HK\$34,000 per annum for full-day programmes. In the 2011/12 academic year, the voucher subsidy to parents increased to HK\$16,000, so the maximum tuition fees payable for voucher-eligible kindergartens were further reduced to HK\$8,000 and HK\$32,000 for half-day and full-day programmes respectively. In Hong Kong, over 70% of children enrol in half-day programmes (Education Commission, 2010, p. 15) and all 40 interviews for this research were done with parents of students in half-day programmes. Any impact by the Voucher Scheme might well be similar for parents paying half-day-programme fees and those paying full-day programme fees. The analysis here, nonetheless, is on a half-day programme with tuition fee figures for the 2010/11 school year, as all interviewees of the study were from half-day programmes, and the interviews were conducted in 2010.

The Voucher Scheme segregates the pre-primary education market into two distinct segments separated by a wide gap in tuition fees effectively payable after parents redeem vouchers. To send a child to a voucher-eligible school, costs range from no charge at all to a maximum of HK\$10,000 per annum. Quite a number of

kindergartens charge from nothing to a mere several hundred Hong Kong dollars a year; the median is about HK\$4,000. On the other hand, the non-voucher-eligible schools, with rare exceptions, charge from HK\$24,000 to as much as HK\$90,000 or more per annum. The median tuition fee for non-voucher-eligible schools is HK\$40,800, which is almost nine times as high as that for voucher-eligible schools. Importantly, there is very little from which to choose within the HK\$10,000 to HK\$24,000 price range. Figure 9 shows tuition fees after voucher redemption for all half-day kindergartens in Hong Kong. The gap is obvious.



Note. Author's compilation based on EDB school profile data for school year 2010/11. <http://www.chsc.hk/kindergarten/>

Figure 9. A wide gap in tuition fees.

In other words, parents can choose a voucher-eligible school, for which they pay between nothing and the maximum of HK\$10,000. Alternatively, they can choose a non-voucher-eligible school costing them over HK\$24,000. One of the eligibility criteria for voucher redemption is that tuition fees must be below

HK\$24,000 for half-day programmes. Most kindergartens which charged less than or exactly that amount could therefore, after the Voucher Scheme's introduction, successfully apply to become voucher-eligible schools. Only very few failed to do so for other reasons. Upon becoming voucher eligible, these schools can redeem for their parents a voucher subsidy of HK\$14,000, and parents effectively pay no more than HK\$10,000 in tuition fees. Because of how wide this gap is, it is inappropriate to consider voucher-eligible schools and non-voucher-eligible schools as a single market. Nonetheless, the markets are not completely separate, as parents are free to choose between the two through the hurdle price for moving from the low cost segment to the high cost segment of the market. Therefore, it is more appropriate to consider the market as a two-tier one with a wide hurdle in between the tiers. This hurdle is widened by the Voucher Scheme.

The impact of increased segregation between the two segments of a two-tier market goes beyond tuition fees. The Voucher Scheme requires that kindergartens adopt a local curriculum, as stipulated in Education Bureau's Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum, and be subject to the quality assurance mechanism of the Education Bureau. After the 2011/12 school year, the only schools that could redeem vouchers were those which fulfilled the prescribed standards of the quality review conducted by the Education Bureau. It was thereby ensured that voucher-eligible schools conformed to the guidelines and standards of the Education Bureau.

As mentioned in the section on the Voucher Scheme as the key intervening condition, one of the key elements of the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* is that only schools using Cantonese as the medium of instruction are considered to be adopting a local curriculum. For eligibility, the Voucher Scheme demands a local curriculum and quality assurance. This dictates that all voucher-eligible schools,

accounting for 84% of kindergartens in Hong Kong (Education Commission, 2010, p. 18), use Cantonese as the medium of instruction; and they follow other requirements stipulated in the Education Bureau's *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum*. As a result, inside the voucher-eligible segment of the two-tier market, intra-segment conformity is incurred by the Voucher Scheme's requirements for a local curriculum and quality assurance. In the non-voucher-eligible segment of the two-tier market, there is room for diversity.

The Voucher Scheme empowers parents with resources. On the other hand, it creates a two-tier market with one segment subject to increasing conformity to the Government's regulations and standards. Educational services provided in this segment become more homogeneous because of such conformity. Parents who choose voucher-eligible schools are empowered by better resources and are enabled to migrate to other strategies rather than being guided by financial considerations. This is the case as long as they are choosing within the voucher-eligible segment. Nevertheless, the diversity of this segment is significantly reduced by the Voucher Scheme. The requirements for a local curriculum and for Cantonese as the required medium of instruction are felt particularly strongly by certain parents. In the other segment consisting of non-voucher-eligible schools, there continues to be diversity in media of instruction, in curricula, and in pedagogical approaches. In this segment, where much less regulation is carried out by the Government, parents are free to choose and are given more resources and knowledge in connection to school choice. If parents' resources still do not sufficiently permit crossing the two-tier market's wide hurdle, they are only empowered to choose from a larger number of schools having far less variety between them. Parents can adopt more strategies aimed at securing their children happier childhoods or more promising futures, but parents can

only choose between more homogeneous schools. For this group of parents, their empowerment would appear to be limited, as the pre-primary education market is segregated.

A different kind of strategy migration for middle-class parents. The market is segregated into two tiers, and some middle-class parents previously aligned with the middle of the continuum become forced to choose between the two distinct market segments. The quadrant diagram therefore needs to be redrawn to illustrate how these parents adopt a different kind of strategy migration from that of the less advantaged parents discussed in previous sections.

The study suggests that the voucher tends to incite some middle-class parents to opt out of voucher-eligible schools for autonomy in language selection. Under the Voucher Regime, some of these middle-class parents' school choices migrate from tuition-fee-based strategies to language strategies. For example, Parent D2 and Parent H4, as cited in the section on the *building a future* strategy, gave up vouchers for the sake of choosing a bilingual kindergarten. On the other hand, other middle-class parents might find that relative price for language choice becomes too high after taking into account voucher eligibility, resulting in these parents choosing to migrate from language strategies to tuition-fee-based strategies. However, this explanation of English and Putonghua being effectively traded off for vouchers could constitute mere speculation, as none of the respondents told me that they had sacrificed a language strategy for the sake of vouchers. The topic requires future research. The dynamic is summarised in Figure 10. The solid arrow from a tuition strategy to a language strategy is a product of the study data, but the dotted arrow from a language strategy to a tuition strategy is only my conjecture. I emphasise the middle class here, as low- and modest-income families cannot afford to cross the

hurdle to non-voucher-eligible schools, and they do not have language as a dominant strategy either before or after the Voucher Scheme's introduction.

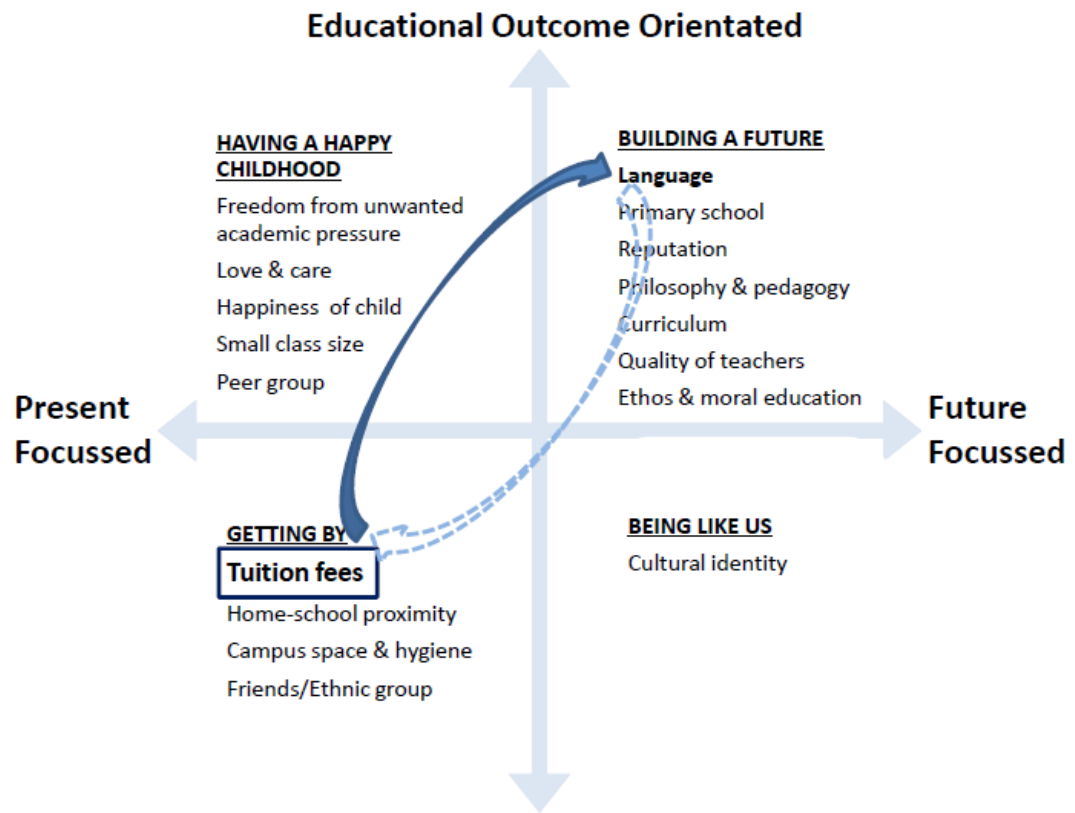


Figure 10. Migrating between language and tuition fee strategy.

Segregation by non-price competition. The Voucher Scheme is also limited in other ways as far as the empowerment which it provides. Despite the increasing homogeneity and bundling of language choice, the study suggests that there are some voucher-eligible schools which, despite their eligibility, are still more popular than other schools and are sought after by parents, largely because of these schools' reputation and their track records for having graduates enter elite primary schools. Where places are limited and tuition fees are reduced to levels quite affordable for most parents, allocation is done by non-price competition largely based on the interplay between parents' expectations, their cultural and social capital, their

ethnicity, their social and economic status, and their sophistication and capacity in making choices. The Voucher Scheme can only lessen, but cannot entirely remove, the segregation between less advantaged families and those which are more privileged. For example, School F was known for its successful track record of sending its graduates on to elite primary schools. All five parents whom I interviewed from School F had relatively high social and economic status, and they possessed high expectations regarding their children's educations. These parents were also rich in resources and were more sophisticated and capable in attributes which advantaged them in non-price competition; they could clearly afford non-voucher-eligible schools but chose School F, and they were successful in getting a place there. Parents with less cultural and social capital occupy an inferior position in this kind of non-price competition. Furthermore, many lower income and modest-income parents adopted a strategy of home-school proximity. These parents, who usually lived in less privileged areas and found transportation expensive, were not able to choose elite schools located in the city's more desirable areas, despite some of these schools being voucher eligible. The research suggests that segregation inside the voucher-eligible segment still exists.

Segregation by stigma effect. For some parents, voucher eligibility put a stigma on the school and became an incentive to resist choosing a voucher-eligible school. For example, some parents associated voucher-eligible schools with a particular pupil profile which they did not desire as a peer group for their children. For example, Parent B2 associated the voucher with schools located inside public estates and did not even want to learn more about the Voucher Scheme, as he did not like the peer group in those schools.

Respondent: I did not consider voucher.

- Interviewer: Why not? Did you know about voucher?
- Respondent: I knew about voucher . . . but I was not very clear about it . . . It seems that the cheaper kindergartens have vouchers but the expensive ones do not. My impression was, maybe because I did not want to send my child to schools in public estates. . . .
- Interviewer: . . . Your understanding was that only inexpensive schools can redeem vouchers but the expensive schools cannot. You however think that the cheaper schools are for the lower income class, public estates. . . .
- Respondent: No, not about lower income class. No, it was not about the issue of lower income class. It was because the school might not be able to teach our child well, no so many things.
- Interviewer: Let me try again as I still don't quite fully get the meaning. Did you think that they might not be able to teach well because these schools were cheap? What were the reasons you thought they could not teach well? Was it because they could not afford better quality teachers or other reasons?
- Respondent: . . . For instance, public estate schools . . . That was my wife's idea, she did not want our child to mix with that type of children, not because of money . . . [but] more because of family background. Kids from this type of families may be more complicated. That is to say that these kids' behaviours might negatively affect our son.
- (Parent B2, non-voucher-eligible school)

Some other parents resisted voucher-eligible schools because they perceived a stigma of overregulation and poor quality. They did not appear to have researched the subject very thoroughly but simply turned down the idea of considering a voucher-eligible school due to the perceived stigma.

- Interviewer: Why did you not choose a voucher-eligible school?
- Respondent: I heard that the Voucher Scheme has put a lot of restrictions on schools. For examples, the quality of teachers, the use of money, and many more this kind of issues.
- (Parent D3, non-voucher-eligible school)
- Interviewer: What understanding do you have about voucher-eligible schools?
- Respondent: My feeling is that . . . er . . . government schools . . . usually . . . anyway they are not private schools and their quality is always an issue. It seems that good quality schools do not have vouchers. Very few good schools have vouchers.
- (Parent G5, non-voucher-eligible school)

Seemingly, the stigma associated with voucher-eligible schools was, in part,

potentially mitigating against closer integration between parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds within schools: On one hand, access to certain schools was being opened up to less wealthy parents; but on the other hand, those from wealthy backgrounds perceived there to be, surrounding voucher eligibility, a stigma which negatively swayed their perception of voucher-eligible schools.

Following discussion of actions and interactions and their consequences, the next section presents the paradigm model with categories added to complete the model.

The Paradigm Model Generated

The central category is parents as choosers. How and why parents choose their children's kindergartens is based on parents' motivation and resources. Family context also influences parents' decisions. The Voucher Scheme, together with other intervening factors including the diversity and accessibility of kindergartens in Hong Kong, mitigates and changes some of the impacts of the causal factors and contextual factors. The actions and interactions of the parents are shaped accordingly, and these actions and interactions result in consequences. The categories produced by the study are integrated by relational statements, developed during the data analysis, into a set of relationships, which is assembled visually into a paradigm model (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) presented in Figure 11.

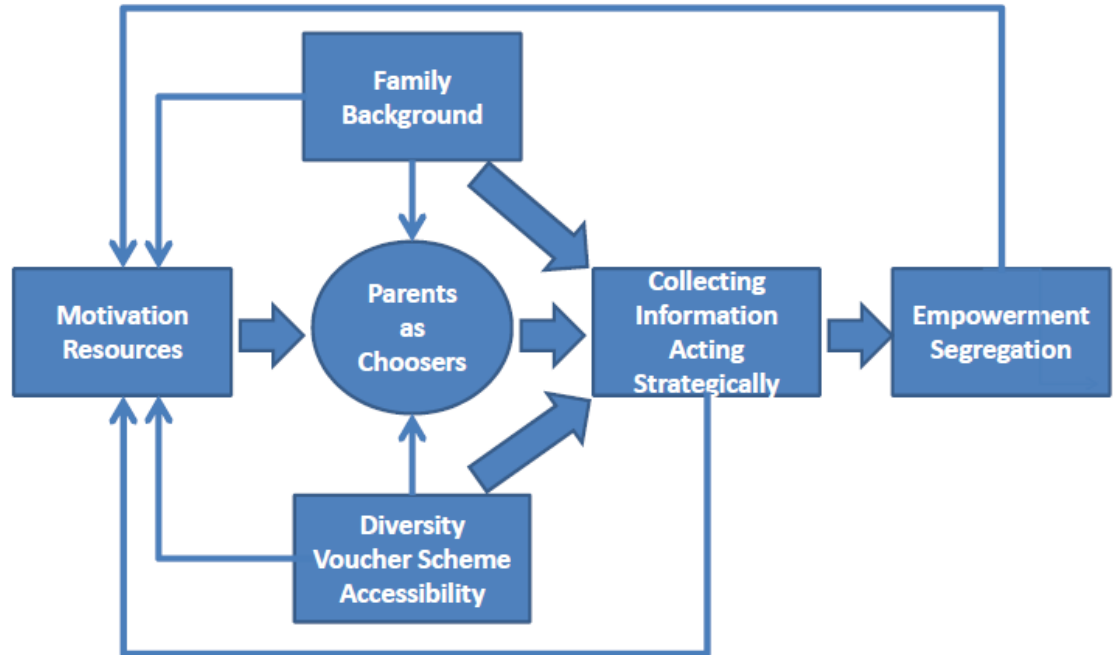


Figure 11. The paradigm model.

Narrative Discussion

The paradigm model, and the categories and relationship it represents, constitute the basis for generating a theoretical explanation of the Voucher Scheme's impact on parental choice in Hong Kong pre-primary schooling. In this segment, with categories developed and relationships identified and integrated into a paradigm model, I further draw from the research literature on school choice in order to substantiate and situate the findings of this study. Additionally, I use the discoveries of this study and its emergent theory to compare and contrast critically with the literature; the goal is 'extending, validating and refining knowledge in the field' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 38).

Some commentators and educators (Frestier & Clem, 2006; P. L. Lam, 2006; Lee, 2006; Li & Wong, 2008; Sung, 2006) have perceived the Voucher Scheme as limiting enhancement of parents' accessibility to desired schools due to the selective eligibility of kindergartens. Nevertheless, there is little research on the complex and subtle impact of the Voucher Scheme in segregating the pre-primary schooling market and on the implications which result concerning parents' school choice. The study finds the Voucher Scheme to bring about both empowerment and segregation and that its impact is intricate and multifaceted.

The Voucher Scheme empowers certain parents in this study by making additional financial resources and school information available to them, so there are more kindergartens where they can afford to send their children, and these parents gain more knowledge about kindergartens. Nonetheless, the claim that Li et al. (2010, pp. 135-136) put forth, suggesting a general improvement in both affordability and accessibility in the context of Hong Kong, is found to be missing the intricate dynamic of school choice and to oversimplify the diverse consequences of the Voucher Scheme. Other research has claimed that the Voucher Scheme represents a 'complete market approach' and leads to more 'commercialisation of services' (Yuen, 2007, p. 356), that it signifies the formal recognition of the consumer power of parents in the education market (Ho, 2008, p. 224), and that it is expected to operate in a 'wholly private market' (Cheng, 2009, p. 362). This research has failed to grasp the implications of the Voucher Scheme's unique intervention in the pre-primary education market: It does not resemble a classical Friedman (1955, 1962) type of voucher system. Nor does such research acknowledge the possibility, as suggested by this study, that the launch of the Voucher Scheme segregates a single pre-primary education market with few regulations into a two-tier market structure

with one of the two segments becoming far more regulated and less diverse than it was before the introduction of the Voucher Scheme. The language strategy is no longer available to the voucher-eligible segment of the market. In essence, the voucher-eligible segment of the pre-primary education market assimilates the notion of a public market proposed by Woods et al. (1998) and is much influenced by public elements such as government regulations. On the other hand, the non-voucher-eligible market segment remains one largely influenced more by private elements such as choice, diversity, completion, demand-driven funding, and self-determination.

The Voucher Scheme's capacity to empower is confined to lower income families whose process of school choice, as evidenced in this study, became a two-step process following the introduction of the Voucher Scheme. Due to a lack of resources, lower income parents first selected the strategy of choosing voucher-eligible schools only. Their reason for doing this was cost related, as tuition fees ranged from zero to HK\$10,000 per annum. After the voucher subsidy, voucher-eligible schools are affordable to most families. The neediest families, which have little or no income at all, are covered by the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme ('CSSA Scheme') and can apply to the Social Welfare Department for additional sums supplementing the fee subsidy received under the Voucher Scheme (Social Welfare Department, 2010). The CSSA Scheme existed long before, and is independent from, the Voucher Scheme. CSSA is a social security scheme providing a safety net for families with little or no income. It is not specifically targeted at subsidising pre-primary schooling. Therefore, the detailed workings of the CSSA Scheme are not part of this study. The key point here is that vouchers have made pre-primary education affordable for most families. In the

matter of school choice, the second step for parents is to adopt other strategies, now more easily available to them, apart from the language strategy.

In essence, the Voucher Scheme made over 80% of kindergartens in Hong Kong much more affordable to parents who choose voucher-eligible schools for their children (Education Commission, 2010). In the cases of parents with low incomes, the study suggests that their focus on tuition fees as an important factor in the school choice process made them decide to choose from the market segment containing voucher-eligible schools. Once that decision was made, they were no longer constrained by financial considerations, as the voucher empowered them. Consequently, they could exercise their school choice based on other strategies which might well otherwise have been secondary to financial considerations associated with the need to meet tuition fee cost.

Through giving parents more financial resources, the study also finds that the Voucher Scheme empowered parents by freeing up their budgets for the increased number of extracurricular activities which they could subsequently afford to do with their children. Li et al. (2010) came to the same conclusions: In the case of lower income families, the research discovered that never before had opportunities to undertake such extracurricular activities been financially possible for these parents.

However, in certain aspects of choice, parental empowerment was limited and institutionally bounded. The study finds that those parents who chose voucher-eligible schools migrated to various strategies: home-school proximity, campus space and hygiene, friends and ethnic groups, love and care, small class sizes, freedom from unwanted academic pressure on children, school reputation, quality of teachers, and ethos and moral education. However, parents were denied the opportunity to choose on the basis of a school's language policy or curriculum,

which are both prescribed in the case of voucher-eligible schools. Li et al. (2010) concluded that the Voucher Scheme increased accessibility on the basis that 80% of parents surveyed did not agree that their choices were limited by the Voucher Scheme. Nevertheless, for those parents who take up vouchers, the effects of being denied access to language and curriculum strategies are subtle ones. In quantitative survey research posing predetermined questions, Li et al. did not capture this subtlety. Language as a school choice strategy has not been mentioned in overseas literature (for example, Denessen et al., 2005; Kelly, 2007; Maddaus, 1990; Witte, 2000; Woods et al., 1998). However, Yuen and Grieshaber (2009) mentioned language as an important factor for consideration among kindergarten parents in Hong Kong. They said that, in Hong Kong, parents give a lot of emphasis to learning English and Putonghua, but the Voucher Scheme specifically prohibits kindergartens from using either English or Putonghua as the medium of instruction. This intervention contributes to the bundling of the tuition fee consideration with a language strategy.

There are parents who deem language strategy or curriculum to be more of a priority than are tuition fees. This study finds that some of them opted out the Voucher Scheme in spite of their financial situations. Whilst being interviewed, they reported that they would have preferred to redeem vouchers. However, they chose not to do so, as obtaining access to a school with a policy of language instruction unavailable in voucher-eligible schools outweighed any other consideration. These interviewees were frustrated to find their school choices being limited by the Voucher Scheme, and hence they dismissed voucher redemption. The Voucher Scheme effectively segregated the market into two tiers—voucher eligible and non voucher eligible—and widened the gap between the two. Increased costs were thus faced by those parents who would otherwise choose a voucher-eligible school but

who opted out due to their desire for a school with a specific language or curriculum strategy. Parents found that the Voucher Scheme led to a reduction rather than to an enhancement in the availability of a language strategy or a curriculum strategy. The study finds there to have been a particularly significant impact on middle-class parents who tended to give high priority to learning English and Putonghua. Interestingly, few parents suggested that they considered an alternative curriculum strategy to be among their most emphasised considerations; the language strategy was the dominant strategy in many middle-class families. These middle-class parents from the study were often more motivated and had stronger financial resources; they opted out of the voucher-eligible school segment to receive access to a language strategy. They were disempowered by the Voucher Scheme's segregation of the market. The empowerment and disempowerment of parents must be understood in connection with the contextual backgrounds of the families, with their levels of sophistication and capacity, and with the strategies they prefer.

Without access to the grapevine, parents with little social capital could not obtain hot knowledge aiding school choice (Ball & Vincent, 1998). The Voucher Scheme provides parents with more official and statistical, or *cold*, knowledge. The scheme helps much less with the type of hot knowledge often very useful for school choice. The study finds that some parents mitigated such disadvantages by going to internet forum discussions to collect hot knowledge. However, the study also finds some parents with less cultural capital to have been hindered in their ability to interpret information, to make use this information, and to imagine their children's future potential.

Disadvantaged families from the study were also more willing to trade off their children's long-term potential for the immediate needs of the household. This

signified their decreased motivation with lower levels of expectation for their children's achievements years into the future. The Voucher Scheme can intervene and help with financial resources and cold knowledge, but it can do little in terms of motivation and non-financial resources, that is cultural and social capital.

Disadvantaged families migrated to strategies concentrated on getting by; they focussed on the near-term needs and considerations of the family and on present gratification to give their children happy childhoods. Disadvantaged family parents may have been constrained by their own experience, causing low expectations or causing overestimation of the difficulties associated with some long-term strategies. This echoes what Ambler (1997) found to be the case in European countries and in the United States: Disadvantaged parents differ from privileged parents in their motivation and their capacity to understand and to evaluate information. Ball et al. (1995) interpreted this as 'working class short-termism' as opposed to the 'deferred gratification' of the middle-class. The low expectations found are also in line with what Ball et al. (1995) suggested is the influence from the iconography of the parents' own schooling. Ball et al. (1996) categorised parents into three groups: 'privileged/skilled choosers', 'semiskilled choosers', and the 'disconnected'. The disconnected choosers lacked social and cultural capital, they often chose from among only a very small number of schools, and their decisions were based on their impressions of school buildings and facilities or on local and community knowledge from friends or relations (Ball et al., 1996, p. 106). The aforementioned findings resemble the getting-by strategies found in this study.

The lack of social capital and cultural capital, the inferior socioeconomic status, and the lower level of motivation all weaken the sophistication and capacity of the underprivileged parents as choosers. As not all schools are equal, even among

voucher-eligible schools, these parents are at a disadvantage in their ability to find and then compete for places for their children. The empowerment of the Voucher Scheme, in providing additional financial resources and cold knowledge, is therefore weakened. As Butler and Hamnett (2010, p. 2433) suggested, parents in the United Kingdom are choosing within a system characterised by a shortage of schools perceived to be 'good'. They further remarked that

the reality is therefore often some form of rationing—whether by ability, religion, or place of residence (notably, distance to school).
(Butler & Hamnett, 2010, p. 2333)

Parents' sophistication and their capacities are very important for success amid rationing or allocation of places based on non-price competition. The study finds that some parents tended to suffer from a lack of social and cultural capital and from relatively weak socioeconomic status. The competitiveness of these parents was hindered by an accompanying lack of adequate sophistication and of capacity in school choice. Such effects extended even to those parents who were not necessarily satisfied with a getting-by strategy and who may have wanted to engage in the non-price competition and to venture to the *building-a-future* quadrant of strategies for a place in more sought-after schools. These characteristics, to a certain extent, made these types of parents adopt the behaviour of semiskilled choosers as developed by Ball et al. (1996):

The families represented by this type [of semi-skilled chooser] have strong inclination but limited capacity to engage with the market. . . . Their biographies and family histories have not provided them with the experiences or inside knowledge of the school system and the social contacts and cultural skills to pursue their inclination to choice 'effectively'. Their economic, social and cultural capital are in imbalance.
(Ball et al., 1996, p. 102)

Pierre Bourdieu (1977a) introduced the notion of *habitus* to explain people's behaviours and proposed that human actions are largely determined and regulated by

their situations and their identities within a culture (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). *Habitus* is

an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted.
(Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 95)

At the centre of Bourdieu's (1977a) notion of *habitus*, according to Sayer (2010b), is

the idea of dispositions, inclinations, expectations and skills which are acquired, especially in early life, through repeated experience of the particular social relations, material circumstances and practices that prevail in the part of the social field in which the individual is located. Being adjusted or attuned to those circumstances, the structure of dispositions of the *habitus* reflects their structure, and gives the individual a 'feel for the game' in which they are located.
(Sayer, 2010b, p. 109)

In other words, individuals acquire *habitus* through social conditioning. *Habitus* is 'a product of history' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54) and acts 'as a system of cognitive and motivating structures' to shape human behaviours (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). Under the influence of *habitus*, individuals have the dispositions to 'behave in ways that reproduce the existing practices and hence the existing structure of society' (Elder-Vass, 2007, p. 327). Such dispositions are subconscious. They provide generative capacities which are not concrete rules but which potentially induce the individual to react to situations in certain socially conditioned ways (Elder-Vass, 2007).

People do not necessarily relate their motivation to their chances of succeeding in their aspirations then carry out the necessary assessments. On the contrary, people tend to rule out what they perceive as unachievable, doing this based on their *habitus*:

Bourdieu makes the point that those decisions are always already made: 'The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of

necessity, that is to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable'.
(Webb et al., 2002)

Coldron (2010) suggested that all parents, regardless of the social group to which they belong, make conscientious and informed school choices. Their choices differ because they have different values, social positions, and wealth. Similarly, Ball et al. (1996) attributed to parents' social positions the differences in how they choose schools:

Choice is thoroughly social, it is a process powerfully informed by the complex lives families lead and by their biographies—in short their position within a social network. Differences in choice-making are not a matter of relative efficiencies or social pathology in which certain parents are less responsible, or efficient or effective choosers.
(Ball et al., 1996, p. 93)

Bourdieu suggested that people's *habitus* tend to 'guarantee the "correctness" of practices' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54) and to socially condition and structure paths of actions even more reliable than formal rules. Strategies of action and interaction are objectively organised, in Bourdieu's (1990) view,

without being the product of a genuine strategic intention—which would presuppose at least that they be apprehended as one among other possible strategies.
(Bourdieu, 1990, p. 62)

The concept of *habitus* can inform how motivation differs among parents and, as a result, affects their school choice decisions. Still, it is important to emphasise that *habitus* cannot explain everything about parents' motivation and actions. Being choosers, parents' actions cannot be completely determined by social conditioning and circumstances. The capacity of choice denotes

a power possessed by each individual whereby, in any situation, he or she could really have acted other than he or she did.
(Lawson, 1997, p. 174)

To be able to choose, parents must be able to exercise conscious deliberation and strategic decisions, rather than having their actions automatically determined by

dispositions acquired from social conditioning and from circumstances in the past. In other words, parents, as acting subjects and as individual agencies, are able to exercise reflexivity as a causal power in codetermining their courses of action, with this accompanied by the force of *habitus* and by other causal powers (Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010). Summarising Margaret Archer's critical realist approach to reflexivity as an argument for the importance of reflexive deliberations in human actions, Elder-Vass (2007) remarked that

Archer's account of human action places conscious reflexive deliberation at its heart. For Archer, reflexivity is a power that human beings possess: it is the ability to monitor ourselves in relation to our circumstances . . . It is exercised through a process of conscious *reflexive deliberations* during which we conduct internal conversations with ourselves about ourselves . . . [namely] our situation, our behaviour, our values, our aspirations. The inner conversation 'is a ceaseless discussion about the satisfaction of our ultimate concerns and a monitoring of the self and its commitments' . . . And for Archer reflexivity is specifically a *causal* power . . . Thus in our reflexive deliberations we come to conclusions that affect our behaviour in the social world.
(Elder-Vass, 2007, p. 331)

My findings relating to differences in motivation, in resources, in sophistication, and in capacity are socially situated. At the same time, parents are found to be reflexive and are able and willing to exercise choice. There is no implication of patterns indicating personal deficiencies in parents. Parents care about their children's welfare. Within the constraints shaped by their experience and resources, parents want to do the best for their children. Reflexive deliberations by the parent as an active individual agency and conditioning within social structure interact to jointly determine school choice actions. In the paradigm model developed in the study, parents' reflexive deliberations and the influence of the social structure are present within the categories and their relationships rather than in separate categories on their own. In a way, Bourdieu's *habitus* and Archer's reflexivity are

being synthesised (Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010). School choice is jointly determined by the categories and their structured relations, by parents' embedded reflexivity, and by other mechanisms at work within the respective contexts. Parents' actions should not be reduced to being determined by individual categories or factors, as is often the case in the literature (Denessen et al., 2005; Maddaus, 1990; Taylor, 2002; Waslander et al., 2010; Witte, 2000; Woods et al., 1998). Rather, the paradigm model as a whole is a causal mechanism producing the emerging properties observed in parents' school-choice actions. An emergent property is

one that is not possessed by any of the parts individually and that would not be possessed by the full set of parts in the absence of a structuring set of relations between them. Perhaps the commonest illustration of emergence in the literature is the example of water. . . . The properties of water are clearly very different from those of its components, oxygen and hydrogen, when these are not combined with each other in the specific form that constitutes water. One cannot, for example, 'put out a fire with oxygen and hydrogen' . . . Hence water has emergent properties.
(Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 17)

Acknowledging that the existence of differences in parents' experiences or social positions and choice making is influenced by resources, by value, and by social positions, Ball et al. (1996) noted that privileged/skilled choosers have three key qualities not shared by the other parents: 'an inclination to choice; 'marked capacity to engage with and utilize the possibilities of choice', including economic, social, and cultural capital; and diverse aspirations for 'desires and concerns related to their children and their children's futures'. However, the fourth quality of being 'impressionistic, affective' and so on is more widely shared with other choosers. *Inclination to choice* is similar to *motivation* in my paradigm model; and *capacity to engage* resembles a blend of my study's categories of sophistication, capacity, and resources. Time horizon is more explicitly elaborated in this study's paradigm model and strategy quadrant diagrams than it is in Ball et al.'s (1996) modelling of the three

ideal types of choosers. Furthermore, in this study, strategies are grouped into quadrants, and the importance of parents' motivation, resources, and social contexts are recognised. However, parents are not categorised and labelled correspondingly with Ball et al. (1995, 1996), Ball and Vincent (1998), and Vincent et al. (2010). Parents could choose a combination of strategies from various quadrants, determined by the causal mechanism that the paradigm model represents.

Woods (1996) and Hastings et al. (2005) found that working-class parents are more inclined to choose a school near to home than are professional and middle-class parents, who give priority to academic quality. Likewise, this study finds that parents with fewer resources give the home-school proximity high priority, though resources are not the only kind of causal powers determining school choice, which is a result of complex dynamics in a causal mechanism. Throughout the study, single categories' causal relationships with parents' school choices are treated as tentative and partial. In Hong Kong, parents are free to apply for their children to attend kindergartens located anywhere in Hong Kong. Kindergartens are free to admit students from any location of residence. Unlike primary schools, kindergartens in Hong Kong have no catchment areas or residential-location-based central allocation of places. Therefore, choosing a nearby school is a deliberate but default strategy for convenience, and such 'default chooser' behaviour (Vincent et al., 2010, pp. 292-293) weakens the empowerment brought on by the Voucher Scheme. Some European theorists have proposed that the place of residence is a fourth form of capital, 'spatial capital' (Francois, Levy, Oberti, Poupeau, & van Zanten, as cited in Bartho & Monfroy, 2010). This concept aims at accounting for the spatial dimension to a household's benefits and limitations, separate from the socioeconomic dimensions of economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital

concepts of Pierre Bourdieu (1986). However, as long as they can afford the monetary costs and time for transportation, parents in Hong Kong are free to send their children to schools in any area. Parents can also change residence freely, as long as they are willing and able to afford the higher housing costs in some areas. The spatial capital concept is thereby made less relevant. The spatial dimension of capital is not autonomous but is closely linked with the financial resources or economic capital which parents possess. I find resources, especially economic capital of parents as choosers, to be more relevant than is spatial capital. I do not consider that the latter concept adds value to the explanation of the selection by some parents with a home-school proximity strategy. Suggestions put forward by Kelly (2007) and Waslander et al. (2010) have supported this: More modest motivation results from lower expectations and from overestimation of difficulties; parents in less advantaged families are less endowed with resources in terms of economic, cultural, and social capitals; these less advantaged parents are found to have lower sophistication in awareness and weighing of alternatives; less advantaged parents' capacities are also lower in assessing risks and uncertainties for the planning of their children's futures. More modest levels of motivation, of resources, of sophistication, and of capacity potentially contribute to stronger preferences for schools favouring home-school proximity, campus space and hygiene, and children's happiness. Similar social-position-induced tendencies in less sophisticated school choice are found in Ball (2003), in Gewirtz et al. (1995), in Hastings et al. (2007), and in Maddaus (1990).

Another point to note, in the case of the parents from this study, is that home-school proximity strategies were adopted primarily for convenience of family logistics and to avoid children having to travel long distances. Parents were not

motivated by a desire to connect with the local community, which, it has been suggested, is experienced in the U.K. (Vincent et al., 2010; Wilkins, 2010a). Nor was there evidence of deliberate metropolitan middle-class efforts by people wanting to act as good citizens (Raveaud & van Zanten, 2007). None of the parents being interviewed in this study mentioned principle-based desire for connecting to the local community.

When ethnic-minority parents adopt a strategy of choosing a school because friends and students of the same ethnic group are there, the Voucher Scheme does not help to reduce segregation. The study finds this strategy tending to be dominant among some ethnic-minority parents. In fact, the majority of ethnic-minority parents interviewed in this study disregarded alternatives and considered only a single school, namely one attended by the children of their friends and colleagues from the same ethnic group. This is a form of *self-segregation*. Between Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands and native Dutch pupils, Denessen et al. (2005) did not find significant segregation but suggested that this might only be so due to a lack of Muslim schools in the Netherlands. Denessen et al. (2005) conjectured that

As opposed to the expected ‘white flight’ or departure of native Dutch pupils from ‘black’ schools, a form of self-segregation is likely to occur when immigrant Muslim parents actively seek and select a ‘black’ school for their child.

(Denessen et al., 2005, p. 364)

Kristen (2008) found that Turkish families in Germany frequently pay attention to only one school, which is typically a school accommodating more foreign nationals. However, she attributed this phenomenon to variation in knowledge and perception. Considering school choice as a sequential process, she suggested that the parent perception of alternatives is of primary importance in contributing to such segregation.

Bagley (1996, p. 570) found that ‘white parents choose not to send their children to schools with high numbers of black or Asian pupils.’ This study does not find the same kind of flight by the ethnic majority from the ethnic minorities. In the cases of some parents who could be considered well off or middle class, what the data do reveal is these parents’ reluctance to send their children to certain kindergartens; namely those kindergartens which are located in less affluent public housing estates and which have a high proportion of immigrants from mainland China. Voucher eligibility, to some parents, carries stigmas of undesirable peers as well as of diminished academic quality. These stigmas contribute to social segregation.

Some parents in this study reported having used only information learned from friends. Some others said that the teachers in certain schools gave good treatment and additional help to non-Chinese speakers. By providing more cold knowledge, the Voucher Scheme can help mitigate some influence of the perception issue. However, unless the ethnic-minority parents themselves want to take action, it may not be able to do much about self-segregation driven by ethnicity in Hong Kong. At any rate, for these parents to demonstrate the values and preferences that they do may be perfectly natural. This study does not find religion to be a strategy per se. Religion is perceived as an indicator of other desired qualities such as loving and caring teachers and moral education.

This study does not attempt to gauge the net effects of empowerment and disempowerment and of segregation incurred by the Voucher Scheme on society as a whole. I find that the Voucher Scheme’s impact on parents is contextual and is greatly influenced by parents’ motivation and resources. Aggregation of individual parents’ school choice into a universal pattern has limited use for advancing our

understanding, and it may even be misleading. The scheme's impact is multifaceted and needs to be analysed and understood in context. There are limitations to the categories and their relationships as developed in the study: At best, they can tentatively shed light regarding the impacts on empowerment, disempowerment, and segregation. Felt by individual parents or groups of parents, these effects are contingent on the operation of categories together with their capacity of reflexivity to collectively determine parents' decisions and subsequent strategic actions (Elder-Vass, 2007). I am aware of heated debate, appearing in the school choice literature, about social segregation (Allen & Vignoles, 2007; Ambler, 1997; Ball, 1993; Croxford & Paterson, 2006; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Gibson & Asthana, 2000; Goldstein & Noden, 2003; Gorard & Fitz, 1998, 2000, 2006; Gorard et al., 2003; Noden, 2000, 2002) and of Li et al.'s (2010) claim that the Voucher Scheme resulted in a general increase in affordability and in accessibility to pre-primary education in Hong Kong. However, I find that the actual market structure and the behaviours of parents acting as choosers are far more complex than these prior research studies can possibly reveal. The Voucher Scheme turns the Hong Kong pre-primary education market into a two-tier market. The market is one in which empowerment, disempowerment, and segregation all take place at the same time and in many forms within different market segments. This is seen in various ways by different parents, depending on their motivation and resources, on their level of sophistication and capacity as choosers resulting from their families' contextual backgrounds, and also depending on strategies taken.

This narrative elaboration of the findings from the paradigm model is tentative. The emergent categories are saturated, but the theorisation remains preliminary and subject to development and modification through further research

and triangulation with new data. Rather than engaging in an attempt to extrapolate, to the whole of Hong Kong's society, empirical findings and analytical inferences from 40 interviews, I maintain a substantive focus on parents' various circumstances and on the conditions influencing these parents' school choice strategies. The theory generated in the study is presented in a paradigm model and in strategy quadrant diagrams, which conceptualise the causal mechanism of school choice in context, and the theory is developed further in a narrative discussion.

Summary

This chapter is the core of the study. Employing the analytical framework set out by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), it analyses the findings from the data. The central category developed from the findings is *parents as choosers*. The behaviour of parents as choosers depends on many factors. In this chapter, I identify, develop, integrate, and relate these factors; and I put together a paradigm model aiming at explaining how parents act as choosers and how the Voucher Scheme impacts on parents' school choice processes. I found no indication of personal incompetence or of parental deficiency which might affect parents either in terms of their sophistication in weighing alternatives or of their capacity to plan strategically for their children's futures. Parents' motivation, sophistication, and capacity were shaped by their *habitus* and their social positions, by the resources with which they were endowed, and by their personal reflexive deliberations. I also found that the course of actions and interactions taken by parents, in exercising their school choices, was impacted by parents' family backgrounds, by the diversity and accessibility of schools, and by the Voucher Scheme. The interplay of these categories and these relationships steered parents' courses of actions in exercising school choice. As an intervening category, the Voucher Scheme induced migration of strategies. Lower

income parents, being empowered by the Voucher Scheme, became able to choose other strategies apart from focussing on tuition fees. Due to the selective eligibility of schools, and due to additional regulations, the Voucher Scheme made the pre-primary education industry into a two-tier public market. Language and curriculum strategies were denied to parents who chose a voucher-eligible school. Empowerment given to lower income parents was therefore constrained. Some middle-class parents, in having to opt out from choosing voucher-eligible schools to pursue a language or curriculum strategy, may have tended to be disempowered by the Voucher Scheme. The empowerment and disempowerment caused by the Voucher Scheme do not occur in a vacuum. The resulting impact on parents' choices of school for their children is an intricate process involving many parts. These parts are summarised in the paradigm model generated in this chapter. In the next chapter, I discuss the highlights and implications of the findings, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

Subsidies for pre-primary education have been a frequent subject of public policy debate in recent years. However, research on school choice and on the Voucher Scheme is limited in Hong Kong. Even in the wider global research community, the existing body of knowledge tends to focus on analysing school choice in terms of factors and variables. The most important contribution of this study to the body of knowledge about school choice and about education vouchers is the construction of a theory providing a plausible and credible explanation of the Voucher Scheme's impact on parents' intricate and multifaceted school choice processes. The emphasis of the study is on processes. This theory is relevant, because it can shed light on our understanding of school choice and can enhance our ability to analyse and interpret substantive issues about the Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong as well as about education vouchers in general.

In this study, a distinctive quality characterises investigation of the Voucher Scheme's impact on choices made by parents selecting kindergartens for their children; namely a Straussian grounded theory method is adopted, along with a critical realist perspective and related tools of inference. As presented in Chapter Four, the study provides a paradigm model, strategy quadrant diagrams, and a theory generated to present an explanation of the causes and contingent effects of school choice under the intervention of vouchers. The study codes and develops concepts and categories using data collected from 40 semi-structured interviews with parents, both from voucher-eligible schools and from non-voucher-eligible schools, along with data from documents relevant to the Voucher Scheme. With these concepts and categories, a paradigm model is constructed connecting the causal conditions, the contextual conditions, the intervening conditions, the central category, and actions

and interactions with their consequences. This model provides the backbone of a theory explaining the school choice process under the Voucher Scheme. The theory is then enriched by additional elaboration, with quadrant diagrams, of choice strategies and of how they have changed as a consequence of the Voucher Scheme. Summative comments integrating with the literature examined in Chapter Two complete the theory generation in the narrative discussion of Chapter Four.

Chapter Five consists of two parts. The first part draws together key aspects of the previous chapter's findings and discussion to set out, in the form of a grounded theory for school choice, conclusions about the research questions. The second part of the chapter furthers discussion to expound the study's implications for methodology, for theory, and for practice.

Conclusions about the Research Questions

The research problem of this study is the impact of the Voucher Scheme on pre-primary school choice in Hong Kong. The following research questions, set out in Chapter One, shape my inquiry into the research problem:

- How do parents choose kindergartens for their children?
- What impact does the Voucher Scheme have on school choice?

School choice process. The central category in the paradigm model, which is therefore the nexus of the grounded theory developed in the study, is that of parents as choosers. The parents studied demonstrated various degrees of sophistication and capacity. Sophistication, in this study, refers to parents' tendencies to reason and weigh up school choice alternatives after searching for relevant information. Capacity refers to parents' tendencies to plan strategically for their children's more distant futures. The study finds that sophistication and capacity are influenced by the motivation and resources that parents have. Motivation and resources are categorised

as causal conditions. I adopt Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* and his concept of capitals (1977a, 1977b, 1984, 1986). These ideas inform the understanding of parents' motivation and resources. The concepts are also used to conceptualise the causality flowing from motivation and resources to parents' sophistication and capacity, as demonstrated through parents' school choices.

Motivation, in this study, refers to a trade-off, or balancing act, between a child's lifelong welfare and the immediate substantive need of the household. Although all parents interviewed demonstrated a desire to enhance the welfare of their children, there were other household needs they wished to address at the same time. A number of parents in this study put home-school proximity as a top consideration. They did so primarily for convenience and for the sake of family logistics. However, it was at the expense, to varying degrees, of other considerations more directly related to the long-term educational needs of the children in question. It was found that some parents were too busy to invest the time necessary for making sophisticated school choices. Such choices require extensive research for information and thorough analysis.

A parent's expectations of his or her child also influence the parent's level of motivation as far as the time and effort that he or she devotes to school choice and to investing financial resources in schooling. The study finds that modest expectations for a child's achievements in the future may be the result of parents' *habitus*, which denotes the influence on parents' behaviours from identity and situation within a culture (Bourdieu, 1977a). As suggested by Ball et al. (1996), by Coldron (2010), and by Webb et al. (2002), choice is socially situated; parents tend not to consider alternatives that they perceive, based on their own social and historical positions, to be unachievable or unthinkable. For example, in my study, some parents' own

schooling did not include experience of academically competitive elite schools, and therefore these parents avoided trying to send their children to such schools. These parents also set modest life goals for their children. For example, they aimed for their sons or daughters to grow up with good characters and to have regular jobs. Some such parents might have overestimated difficulties and risks associated with more academically competitive schools.

Resources constitute another causal condition identified from the parents in this study. I use Bourdieu's (1977a, 1977b, 1984, 1986) concepts of economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital to delineate properties of the category of resources. Economic capital represents parent's abilities to pay for the cost of schooling, including tuition fees and transportation costs. Cultural capital denotes parents' relative positions regarding knowledge, skills, professions, languages, and socially dominant cultures. Social capital, in a nutshell, signifies the abilities of parents, via social connections, to access useful information and resources related to school choice. The parents in the study who lacked economic capital tended to cite tuition fees and family budget, and hence also vouchers, as important considerations. I will expound the impact of vouchers in the next section.

As with research findings elsewhere (Ball et al., 1995; Kelly, 2007; Waslander et al., 2010), parents lacking social and cultural capital were revealed by this study to have more modest expectations. More modest expectations, as discussed in Chapter Four and earlier in this section, potentially resulted in reduced motivation for parents to spend time and effort on school choice. Through the causality flowing from expectations to motivation to sophistication, school choice is affected by parents' cultural and social capital, which furthermore potentially influences parents' capacity in making school choice. I learned from the parents in

the study that lack of cultural capital and social capital tended to encourage greater focus on immediate and basic necessities such as hygiene and air ventilation. A tendency to choose kindergartens attended by children of friends, by relatives, or by families from corresponding ethnic groups was also observed in parents from the study who had less cultural and social capital. A weaker capacity, in terms of planning strategically for the child's future, was suggested by the absence of longer term and education-orientated considerations such as transition to primary schools, philosophy and pedagogy, and the reputation of the kindergarten in question.

Causality flows primarily from parents' motivation and resources to their sophistication and capacity as choosers and, later, to their course of strategic actions and interactions in school choice. The process is mitigated and modified by the context in which the parents are situated and by the external environment in which the parents operate. The key context identified in the study is the background of the family. In connection with family background, ethnicity and socioeconomic status emerge from the data as being most relevant to school choice. Although ethnicity and socioeconomic status inform *habitus*, economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital of a parent, they are distinct concepts and are not to be conflated. Parents from the same ethnic group or socioeconomic context may tend to, albeit not necessarily always, display significant similarities in their *habitus* and endowment of capitals.

Ethnic minority parents in the study were clustered in one school. As discussed earlier, this phenomenon can partly be attributed to a lack of cultural and social capital. Nonetheless, ethnicity may also have contributed to causing the phenomenon, due to parents' preference that their children studied with peers having similar cultural identities. The importance of ethnicity in school choice was

evidenced in Ball et al. (1995) and in Vincent et al. (2010) as part of their respective discussions of circuits of schooling and community choosers.

Another significant property for the contextual condition of family background is a family's socioeconomic status. Lower socioeconomic status has the potential to induce a higher priority being given to consideration of tuition fees, to home-school proximity, to campus, and to a loving and caring environment. However, in this study, families having higher socioeconomic status paid much less attention to the aforementioned factors. Instead, they prioritised primary school transition, philosophy and pedagogy, and kindergartens' reputations. These parents therefore demonstrated a better capacity to plan strategically.

In outlining the central category of parents as choosers, causal conditions and contextual conditions are discussed here. These conditions are specific to individual parents. Categories emerging from concepts related to the general structure of the external environment are named *intervening conditions*. These conditions are structural in nature and intervening in the sense that they facilitate or constrain parents' school choice actions and interactions within a specific context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The intervening conditions identified in the study are: diversity, accessibility, and the Voucher Scheme.

Kindergartens in Hong Kong are diverse in curriculum, in pedagogy, in medium of instruction, and in mode of operation. Instead of being assigned kindergartens, parents choose them for their children. The diversity makes choice meaningful, as the educational experience and outcome offered by kindergartens are different. If kindergartens were all the same, there would be few choices or strategic actions of which to speak. An increase in school diversity facilitates parents' strategic actions in school choice, and a decrease constrains parents' actions and

reduces the number of choices they have. Additionally, school diversity also informs parents' motivation as to investment of time and effort in school choice, because differentiating factors are not limited to price and geographical distance.

Similarly, the greater the school accessibility, the more schools parents may choose from, facilitating parents' school choice actions and interactions. In Hong Kong, a significant number of vacancies exist in kindergartens, as a rule, and admission is subject to no form of centralised or geographically bounded allocation. Nonetheless, as kindergartens are autonomous and selective in student admission, places in parents' desired schools are in short supply, and the competition is keen. Families' resources are instrumental in gaining access to schools and in making choice possible.

The most important intervening condition in connection to the research problem for this study is the Voucher Scheme. This condition also informs school diversity and school accessibility, the other two intervening conditions. Four properties are identified and developed under the category of the Voucher Scheme. These four properties are the coverage of the Voucher Scheme, eligibility of schools for the Voucher Scheme, the quality assurance mechanism introduced by the Voucher Scheme, and transparency of voucher-eligible school data. The Voucher Scheme is universal and non means tested, therefore it covers all Hong Kong children at the school age for pre-primary education. The eligibility of kindergartens for redeeming vouchers rendered by parents is, however, selective. In this study, I found that the selective eligibility of the Voucher Scheme had the most significant impact on school choice. It has facilitated some of the actions and interactions by parents acting as choosers, but it has constrained others. Structural changes have also been brought about, altering school diversity and accessibility, the other two

intervening conditions. In the next section, I set out, in detail, these changes as identified in the study. I propose plausible theoretical explanations for them, together with a discussion of the consequences of school choice under the Voucher Scheme. Prior to that, however, I proceed to outline the actions and interactions of parents, upon which the discussion in the next section is founded.

Parents' actions and interactions are conceptualised into two categories: *collecting information* and *acting strategically*. The source of the information utilised in school choice by parents and the extensiveness of searches for information are identified as a category named *collecting information*. Parents from my study obtained information from friends, relatives, colleagues, and internet forums. In the typology of Ball and Vincent (1998), this is called *grapevine knowledge* or *hot knowledge*. Parents also searched for and collected cold knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998) from formal sources such as the EDB website, school websites, childcare magazines and school guidebooks.

Besides searching for information, I find the parents in the study to have adopted various strategies in school choice. Through abstraction, I conceptualise them into the category of *acting strategically*. Four groups of strategies are identified as properties of this category: *building a future*, *having a happy childhood*, *getting by*, and *being like us*. The conceptualisation of these properties is constructed from the interaction of the dichotomized dimensions represented as being *educational outcome orientated*, *family consideration orientated*, *future focussed*, and *present focussed*. In Chapter Four, these four groups of strategies are illustrated visually in a quadrant diagram (Figure 6). The purpose of the quadrant diagram is to position strategies but not to label parents. Parents can employ several strategies from different quadrants at the same time.

Strategies in the *build-a-future* quadrant include: language, primary school, reputation, philosophy and pedagogy, curriculum, quality of teachers, and ethos and moral education. These strategies represent interaction of educational outcome orientation with future focus. They resemble, to a certain extent, the ‘goal-orientated/objective perspective’ suggested by Ball et al. (1996), but they have a clear long-term focus and demand no objectivity. Educational goals, as well as outcomes, are not necessarily objective and are subject to interpretation by parents. Likewise, this group of strategies is somewhat similar to what Woods et al. (1998) called ‘instrumental-academic value perspective’.

Strategies in the *having-a-happy-childhood* quadrant include: love and care, happiness of child, small class sizes, freedom from unwanted academic pressure on children, and peer groups. They are educational-outcome-orientated and present-focussed strategies. To connect with the typology of the literature, these strategies are similar to what Ball et al. (1996) called ‘person-orientated/subjective perspective’ or to what Woods et al. (1998) termed ‘intrinsic-personal/social value perspective’.

Strategies for *getting by* are: tuition fees, home-school proximity, campus space and hygiene, and friends/ethnic groups. These strategies denote interactions between family consideration orientation and focussing on the present. The term *getting by* makes reference to its use in Ball et al. (1995).

Being like us, a term adopted from Ball (2003), Vincent et al. (2010), and Byrne (2009), refers to the strategy of reproducing a family’s cultural identity. It represents an interaction between family consideration orientation and focussing on the future.

The research findings and theorisation of the school choice process, as presented in the previous chapter, are summarised in this section. Using the framework of a Straussian paradigm model, a theory of school choice is illustrated by denoting, systematically, the relationships and causality between the emergent categories; these are the central category, causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, and actions and interactions. I use the term emergent categories in two senses. First, according to the grounded theory method, categories and their properties emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Secondly, drawing on critical realism, categories and their properties are emergent in the sense that these higher levels of abstraction emerge from data, and concepts of lower abstraction levels are not reducible to the analysis of those lower level data and concepts (Collier, 1994; Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2000).

The theory of school choice is emergent, as it is grounded on the data and yet not reducible to categories, concepts, and data. For example, the findings in this study, congruent to the literature (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Ball et al., 1995, 1996; Vincent et al., 2010), suggest that a lack of social and cultural capital has the potential for causing expectations to be more modest. Thus, in turn, parents tend to be less sophisticated in searching for information and weighing different school choice alternatives, as well as being less capable of planning strategically for children's futures. Nevertheless, this only represents potential and tendencies that require the existence of other conditions, in specific forms and contexts, to enable certain outcomes. Furthermore, parents' school choices are not determined solely by social conditions or by circumstances. Parents' reflexive deliberations are also important in shaping school choice decisions, as reflexivity enables parents to monitor themselves in relation to their circumstances, rather than having their

behaviours passively determined by circumstances (Archer, 2003; Elder-Vass, 2010). Therefore, the theory in the study is not deterministic. It provides a framework for considering the school choice systematically as a mechanism emergent from its parts but not equal to the sum of the parts (Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2010a). The theory is not to be used for predicting the school choice outcome based on variables observed or on conjectured, predetermined, fixed relationships. For example, it is a mistake to conclude that a parent with less cultural capital will always adopt *getting-by* strategies in school choice.

In the following section, using the theory of school choice summarised above, I further discuss the Voucher Scheme's impact on the consequences of school choice.

The Voucher Scheme's impact on school choice. Discussion of school choice's consequences, under the Voucher Scheme's intervention, is organised around interaction between the categories of *empowerment* and *segregation*.

The study identifies four properties for the category of empowerment: *choice set*, *information*, *strategy migration*, and *outside the box*. Based on these properties, parents are deemed as being empowered by the Voucher Scheme when the subsequent benefits include more choices, better access to school information, strategies previously unavailable to them, and additional educational experiences outside school. For properties belonging to the category of segregation, the study conceptualises a *two-tier market*, *conformity*, *non-price competition*, and *stigma*. Segregation in schools is considered to have increased when the Voucher Scheme causes a greater degree of unevenness of student distribution by social groups between schools (Gorard & Fitz, 1998, 2000). This study identifies certain phenomena potentially contributing to such greater degrees of uneven distribution and hence social segregation in schools. They are: segmentation, with high hurdles

existing between segments, in the pre-primary education market; kindergartens becoming more homogenous within a segment; increased non-price competition; and the creation of stigma in association with certain schools.

The Voucher Scheme reduces tuition fees for a large number of kindergartens, making them effectively affordable even to parents whose family incomes are low.

In this way, parents with low and modest incomes tend to be empowered by an increased number of kindergartens where they can choose to send their children. However, affordability does not guarantee accessibility to desired schools.

Empowerment is compromised by strong non-price competition for places in popular schools, and the Voucher Scheme did not remove such competition. Some highly sought after voucher-eligible schools, like School F from the study, are likely to remain inaccessible to disadvantaged parents. Autonomous and selective admission requires that parents be able to compete effectively throughout the school choice process, which is shaped by the interplay between parents' motivation, their resources, their socioeconomic status, their ethnicity, and their choice-making sophistication and capacity. Non-price competition's power to segregate is a force which opposes the tendency of empowerment as a result of more choices being made affordable.

The Voucher Scheme requires that voucher-eligible schools make more school information available. Hence, it has the potential to render some assistance to parents endowed with less social and cultural capital. The more readily available school information mitigates slightly these parents' disadvantages in non-price competition. This is considered to be empowerment, albeit of a limited nature, for disadvantaged parents.

The larger choice set of schools and the increased availability of information associated with the Voucher Scheme is constrained by the segregating force of non-price competition. However, more school choice strategic options are still made available to low- and modest-income parents. Being able to pursue school choices not previously available represents empowerment for these parents.

Another source of empowerment found in this study is that the Voucher Scheme enables less advantaged parents to purchase extracurricular activities for their children. This is an *outside the box* action on the part of these parents, as the enhancement in economic capital resulting from the Voucher Scheme empowers and enables them to choose educational activities which they might otherwise be unable to afford.

Also incurred by the Voucher Scheme, segregating forces are brought into play, however, which restrain the increase in strategic options and hence the empowerment for parents. One of the important segregating forces of the Voucher Scheme is that it turned the pre-primary education market into a two-tier market. The Voucher Scheme created a wide tuition fee gap between voucher-eligible schools and non-voucher-eligible schools, because schools charging over HK\$24,000 per annum lose their eligibility. Parents are mostly choosing either between voucher-eligible schools only, or they are choosing between non-voucher-eligible schools only. Voucher-eligible schools effectively charge, after voucher tuition fees, HK\$10,000 or less. Non-voucher-eligible schools charge HK\$24,000 or more. This leaves a very limited choice of schools that charge between HK\$10,000 and HK\$24,000. In this two-tier market, a two-step school choice process now faces lower income parents for whom the tuition fee amount is an important consideration. The first step is to decide on whether to use the voucher. In other words, the first

decision to make is choosing a segment of the two-tier market. Once they choose a voucher-eligible school during the first step, these less advantaged parents can adopt other choice strategies during the second step, being no longer largely constrained by the otherwise more dominant strategy of tuition fee consideration.

In theory, this two-step process might not greatly contribute to segregation or restrain empowerment for lower income parents if the degrees of diversity and conformity in schools were similar across the two segments. In other words, if kindergartens were similarly diverse or homogenous in the voucher-eligible segment as compared with the non-voucher-eligible segment, a two-tier market incurred by the Voucher Scheme would not contribute to segregation. However, this is not the case. Voucher-eligible kindergartens must adopt a local curriculum and must use only Cantonese as the medium of instruction, whereas non-voucher-eligible kindergartens are under no restrictions as far as languages or curricula used. As a result, language strategies and curriculum strategies are not accessible to parents who have first decided to choose from the voucher-eligible segment. In other words, when parents choose to take up the voucher, they consciously or unconsciously give up their strategic options of choosing a language other than Cantonese or a non-local curriculum. This study finds that the Voucher Scheme induces less advantaged parents to migrate from a tuition-fee strategy to strategies of home-school proximity, campus space and hygiene, friends/ethnic groups, love and care, small class sizes, and freedom from unwanted academic pressure. These parents, however, are denied access to the language and curriculum strategies found to be popular among middle-class families. Although, on one level, the Voucher Scheme provides parents with a greater freedom of choice less constrained by their financial means, such a

choice is still to some extent limited, as only certain types of schools are available to parents wishing to use their vouchers.

The segregating forces of a two-tier market and a more strictly conforming voucher-eligible segment are likely intensified by the tendency, which the study observed, of many middle-class parents to emphasise the importance of language strategies favouring English and Putonghua over Cantonese. The unavailability of language strategies constitutes a factor pushing these middle-class parents away from the voucher-eligible segment and resulting in a higher level of social segregation at schools across the two segments. There is a wide gap between the two segments in terms of tuition fees, taking vouchers into account. Being pushed away from the voucher-eligible segment in a sense disempowers these middle-class parents, as they are facing a smaller availability within their choice sets, as long as they want to pursue language strategies. The Voucher Scheme also increases the relative price parents need to pay for language or curriculum strategies. In other words, parents who, because of language or curriculum strategies, choose not to redeem vouchers sacrifice many alternatives entailing much lower tuition fees.

Furthermore, in a few cases, parents' interviews revealed that there seems to be a certain negative stigma effect on voucher-eligible schools. These schools were perceived as being overregulated, as being poorer in quality, or as having less desirable peers. Nevertheless, language strategies were by far the most frequently cited reason for parents not choosing voucher-eligible schools.

Kindergartens in the voucher-eligible segment of the market became more highly regulated after joining the Voucher Scheme than they were beforehand. As mentioned above, regulatory impositions introduced under the Voucher Scheme meant that curricula became more uniform, and the language used as the medium of

instruction also became uniform. After further attendance at a voucher-eligible kindergarten began to be subsidised by the Government, competition for places became largely non-price competition in this market segment. The Voucher Scheme turned a large part of the previously free pre-primary education market into a market structure better described by the notion of a *public market* (Woods et al., 1998). In such a market, there is more regulation, and stakeholders are not so incentivised by a price mechanism as in conventional free markets. On the other hand, the non-voucher-eligible segment remains largely a free market in its conventional sense.

Limitations. In any research, there are limitations within which the researcher needs to work. The constraint of time is often found in research, particularly so for doctoral theses like this one. Parents do not make their school choice decisions in a snapshot moment. They decide over a period of time, which can range from several months to several years and can even start from the time of pregnancy. During such a period of time, change occurs in the contexts of various conditions, and a parent's own individual reflexivity may evolve as well. Interviews held one month after a school choice decision has already been made may fail to reveal dynamics over a long period. If time permitted, it would be beneficial to conduct several interviews with each participant and to spread the interviews over a longer period of time, including much of the run-up to when the child in question started attending kindergarten.

Conducting interviews during school hours and at the school was convenient for both the participants and for me. However, this arrangement was unlikely to have enabled access to parents working during school hours, who seldom came to their children's kindergartens. With more time, I could have done interviews at some working parents' homes, during evenings and at weekends so as to increase diversity

in the sample of participants studied. Likewise, if there had been more time, I could have expanded the sample to include parents with children attending full-day kindergartens. As it is, my study includes only those parents with children at half-day kindergartens. In the next section, I turn to further investigating this study's implications.

Implications

This section supplements the conclusions outlined in the first part of this chapter. Here, I detail more fully this study's significance for enriching the body of knowledge encompassed by and going beyond the field of school choice. The study's significance is discussed in terms of its implications for methodology, theory, and practice.

Implications for methodology. The Straussian variant of the grounded theory method, as adopted in this study, is well suited to generating theories with a critical realist perspective. Conceptualisation, rather than empirical regularity of relationships between variables, is the nexus in grounded theory. The Straussian grounded theory method for generating theory resembles critical realist theorisation: It attempts to systematically interrelate categories of conditions and human actions, through statements of relationship, to explain social phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The grounded theory method, however, overplays the importance of data at the expense of researchers' interpretive awareness (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Applying a critical realist perspective throughout the study, I am conscious that data do not speak for themselves and must be interpreted and analysed before they become knowledge. In this study, abductive reasoning, as well as constant comparative analysis, is employed during coding to examine how the identified categories gain meaning from the existing school choice and education voucher

literature and from the social theories. Categories and relationships are developed during coding and analysis of data concerning the school choice phenomenon studied, and retroductive inferences are used to generate plausible alternative theoretical explanations for these categories and relationships (Danermark et al., 2002).

Applying a critical realist perspective to the Straussian grounded theory method, I use the method with an ontological emphasis on the underlying mechanism of social phenomena. I also emphasise abduction and retroduction as useful tools for inference in data analysis and in theory generation. In Chapter Three, I thoroughly review and critically analyse the most commonly used variants of grounded theories and the rationale for applying critical realism to the Straussian variant. The use of abduction and retroduction in data analysis and in theory generation is first introduced in Chapter Three. Further discussion and more examples of applications feature in Chapter Four. This synthesis of grounded theory and critical realism is a relatively new research approach, and little prior research has employed it, particularly not in the educational and sociological research fields. Among the few studies advocating the use of this approach, Kempster and Parry (2011) were in leadership research; Partington (1998) studied managerial behaviours; Pratt (1995) and Yeung (1997) applied it in human geography; Oliver (2012) attempted to introduce it to social work research; and F. Lee (2012) proposed using the approach in heterodox economics. Therefore, my study serves to showcase the working of this new approach in educational research, dealing with both methodological issues and systematic application of an analytical framework. I also demonstrate the additional benefits associated with my method, as compared to the Straussian variant in its original form (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) or to other

commonly used variants of the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Further research can adopt the methodology developed in this study and apply it not only to the field of school choice but also to many other fields studying human behaviours. This study contributes to the wider body of knowledge due to its implications for advancing a new methodology in carrying out educational and sociological research.

Implications for theory. The narrative discussion section in Chapter 4 sets out a thorough discussion and critical comparison of the findings in this study and of the literature for school choice. Two significant contributions are made by this study to the school choice literature: developing the notion of a two-tier pre-primary education market resulting from the Voucher Scheme and gaining an understanding of the importance of a language strategy. The two-tier market is a new concept not found in the existing school choice and educational voucher literature. In this two-tier market structure, the Voucher Scheme simultaneously causes empowerment, disempowerment, and segregation in different guises for various groups of parents in different segments of the market. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the findings in this study are supported by the existing research literature in the field. However, the study's findings suggest that this literature tends to be overly simplistic in trying to reach binary—that is, either yes or no—conclusions on the issues of empowerment and segregation. The importance of language strategy, as identified in the study, is also a unique observation about the school choice process under Hong Kong's Voucher Scheme. Language strategy has not been emphasised within the existing body of research both locally in Hong Kong and overseas.

Even more importantly, this study generates a theory which can provide plausible and credible explanations for school choice as a process. The explanations are able to take into account conditions and contexts specific to each parent. Drawing on critical realism and on the grounded theory method, theory in this study is for conceptualising and explaining the causal mechanism of a social phenomenon by denoting emergent categories and their properties and by interrelating them systematically (Danermark et al., 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Theories, categories and their properties are emergent in the sense that they emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) but are not reducible to the lower level concepts and the data (Collier, 1994; Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2000). Unlike other prior research on school choice (Denessen et al., 2005; Maddaus, 1990; Taylor, 2002; Waslander et al., 2010; Witte, 2000; Woods et al., 1998), the theory of school choice generated in this study does not rely on a list of factors as determinants of school choice. In fact, the explanation of parents' school choices cannot be reduced to a set of variables and law-like relationships able to provide predictions. Empirical regularity of the relationships between these variables is unnecessary, from a critical realist perspective, to support theory and knowledge claims. The aim of the theory is to conceptualise events, mechanisms, and structures; this happens in the presence of contingent interactions with the reflexivity of individual social agents and of changing contexts, dependent on conditions (Sayer, 1989, 2010a, 2010b). Since causation can be identified through studying a causal mechanism contextually in a limited number of cases, generating theory does not require extrapolation of empirical findings from cases studied to a larger population (Danermark et al., 2002). The generation of theory for social behaviours, like school choice, is shown in this study to be a mechanism rather than variable analysis. This has theoretical

implications extending beyond the field of school choice. Further research on other topics and other disciplines can benefit by modelling my approach to theory generation in this study.

Furthermore, although the theory generated in this study gives due consideration to parents' contextual conditions, it does not label parents as particular types of choosers. Instead, the theory shows tendencies by parents in different contexts, together with other conditions, to choose certain types of school choice strategies. This is different from typical prior research (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Ball et al., 1995, 1996; Vincent et al., 2010) which labelled parents as particular kinds of choosers. This study shows that the parents' contexts and conditions impact on, but do not determine, school choice. The categories presented in the theory do not exhibit fixed relationships with the outcomes of the school choice mechanism's workings. Rather, parents' actions and interactions are contingent. These relationships and outcomes are mediated by parents' reflexive deliberations as human agents and by other causal mechanisms at work within the context (Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010; Sayer, 2010a, 2010b). Illustrating the theory in a paradigm model does not imply determinism. Individual parents have the capacity, to various degrees, for deliberating reflexively about their actions in response to the intervening condition of the Voucher Scheme and to the continuously changing contexts created by other conditions (Archer, 2003, 2010; Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010). The paradigm model and the theory generated in this study cannot fully capture the complexity of school choice, and the context is uncertain and unable to hold constant (Hammersley, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Like other social theories, the theory generated in this study is a conceptualisation of some fundamental qualities characterising the social phenomenon of school choice; and the theory furthermore aims to answer

specific research questions (Danermark et al., 2002; Hammersley, 2008). Further research on school choice and on other social phenomena can benefit from following my example: I abandon reliance on analysis of variables and on looking for common patterns, but I investigate social phenomena as mechanisms, with emphasis on the underlying causal relationships and fundamental properties.

Implications for practice. I find in this study that the market structure, the strategies adopted by parents, and the outcomes of school choice under the Voucher Scheme are more complex than has been suggested in the school choice and voucher literature. The implications, in terms of empowerment and segregation, vary from parent to parent in response to the conditions and contexts applicable. In addition, the individual reflexivity of these parents also impacts on the school choice actions and outcomes.

Parents may be able to learn from this study how other parents choose kindergartens for their children and how the subtle and complex process of school choice works. This may cause parents to reflect on their own school choice strategies. It may also enable parents to deliberate reflexively on their relationships with their circumstances so as to improve their school choices and to better serve their family values and goals.

For education institutions and for educators, this study provides a theory for school choice, which facilitates understanding of the subject so that improvements can be made to the parent education courses provided. Furthermore, the study also outlines the ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises of the theory so that educators can better understand how the theory comes about.

For kindergarten management, this study provides a tool for better understanding how parents choose kindergartens. Specifically, the theory generated

in the study uncovers a process for which parents adopt different school choice strategies. Thus, kindergartens can also benefit from ideas about how they may more effectively attract the parents they desire. Shedding light on the role of vouchers in the school choice process can help those in kindergarten management to evaluate their decisions about voucher eligibility.

For kindergarten teachers, knowing more about how and why parents choose a kindergarten for their children enables them to better understand the parents of their students and what these parents are likely to be expecting from the kindergarten and from the teachers. It may also help teachers to figure out better ways of encouraging and facilitating parental involvement in the education of their students.

The Voucher Scheme concerns a wide range and large number of stakeholders in society, and therefore it represents an important public policy issue. My theory provides a useful framework for government policy makers: From explaining the school choice processes of parents I studied under the Voucher Scheme, the theory I put forward can be extended to parents who are subject to different conditions and contexts. By applying, to other parents, the theoretical framework developed in this study, policy makers may learn how to better serve families' needs. For example, this study identifies different school choice tendencies by some ethnic minority parents and by mainland Chinese parents. Such families' contexts, as far as their social and cultural positions, are quite distinct from most local Hong Kong families'. I recommend that future research be done on these groups of parents and that theories be generated and used to capture more complexities specific to parents' unique social and cultural positions.

If policy makers want to gauge the aggregate impact of the Voucher Scheme on parent empowerment and on social segregation in Hong Kong's society as a

whole, my findings present a challenge to them. Alternative methodology may be adopted in further research to investigate such aggregate impact. Investigation of aggregate impact on society calls for an extensive research design using large-scale surveys in order to seek common patterns within a population or representative sample (Sayer, 2000). However, as suggested by Sayer (2000), this kind of research is able to show regularities in relationships among variables but may have limited explanatory power for the fundamental mechanism.

For fellow researchers, they can apply this substantive theory of school choice to other substantive areas with different subjects, contexts, and conditions to develop it further. For example, the substantive area or social phenomenon can be university students' choice of subjects or young people's career choices.

Alternatively, to reach a formal theory addressing a formal and conceptual area, researchers can also attempt to develop the grounded theory from a substantive theory covering a substantive empirical area (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In critical realist terminology, this means extending the theory from a specific descriptive theory of choice.

Summary

This study has importance in relation to the understanding of school choice, and its implications extend even beyond the field of school choice. In supplementing the Straussian grounded theory method with critical realism, the methodology used in this study showcases a fresh approach. Gaps in the literature are also filled by the systematic understanding, provided by the study, regarding the school choice process. Finally, this study's approach to the generating of theory sheds light on the implementation of social research in other disciplines.

Appendix A

October 18, 2010.

Ms. xxxxx
Principal
XXXX Kindergarten

Dear Ms. xxxx,

I am now writing to ask your permission to allow me doing a research titled "The Impact of the Early Childhood Education Voucher Scheme on Pre-primary School Choice in Hong Kong" at your School. This research makes an attempt to answer what the impact of the Voucher Scheme is on Hong Kong parents' choice of pre-primary school education for their children.

In relation to this project, I would like to interview FIVE parents from your School. In order to meet the code of practice on research ethics, I will give each interviewed parents a "Participant Information Sheet" and ask them to fill in a "Participant Consent Form" which a bilingual version of each are now attached for your reference.

It is on voluntary basis which parents can indicate his/her interest to you. The interview lasts around an hour for each participant which will be taken place at your School if you are agreed to do so. Detailed logistics can be worked out mutually.

Please be assured that the information collected is merely for research which will be kept strictly confidential, however, a copy of my findings may be provided to your School upon request.

I look forward to your favourable reply and meeting your parents at your earliest convenience.

Best regards,

Amelia Lee
Head of Early Childhood Education
School of Continuing Education
Hong Kong Baptist University

Appendix B

Participant Information Sheet

(A Chinese version will be prepared and given simultaneously to the participant)

Dear Parent,

You are invited to participate in this study which aims to find out the impact of the early childhood education voucher scheme on pre-primary school choice in Hong Kong

What is the interview/questionnaire about?

The purpose is to study how parents choose kindergartens for their children and what impact the voucher scheme has on parents' choice.

What does the interview/questionnaire involve?

The study involves answering a series of questions about your child, what it was like in choosing a kindergarten for your child, what factors you considered, and why these factors were important to you.

Who is conducting the interview/survey?

Amelia Lee, a candidate of Doctor of Education, is conducting the interview/questionnaire survey under the supervision of Professor Carl Bagley from the School of Education at Durham University, the United Kingdom.

How much time with the interview/questionnaire take?

The interview will take about an hour to cover these questions and other relative issues may be raised during the interview while the questionnaire will take about 15 minutes.

Will our conversation be tape recorded or video-recorded?

It will be tape recorded only with your consent and solely for the use in this study. It will not be video-recorded.

Will anyone else know about what I say in the interview/questionnaire and my identity?

All data from the study will be confidential. Only the researcher and her supervisor at Durham University will have access to information on participants. The results of the study will be used in writing a doctoral thesis titled "the impact of the new early childhood education voucher regime on pre-primary school choice in Hong Kong" to submit to the School of Education, Durham University. Furthermore, the results may be used in writing academic articles to be submitted for publication in academic journals. However, individual participants, their children, and the kindergartens will remain anonymous and will not be identified in the thesis or published articles.

Can I withdraw from the study?

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

Can I request information about the findings of the research or any other related information?

Yes, you can contact Amelia Lee at phone: 9098 0575 or email: amenylee@hkbu.edu.hk.

To whom can I complain?

This research has been approved by Durham University's Ethics Advisory

Committee. If you have any complaints about this research, you may contact the

Secretary of the Ethics sheena.smith@Durham.ac.uk (電郵)

Appendix C**TITLE OF PROJECT:**

The Impact of the Early Childhood Education Voucher Scheme on Pre-primary School Choice in Hong Kong.

(The participant should complete the whole of this sheet himself/herself)

*Please cross out
as necessary*

Have you read the Participant Information Sheet? YES / NO

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the study? YES / NO

Have you received satisfactory answers to all of your questions? YES / NO

Have you received enough information about the study? YES / NO

Do you consent to participate in the study? YES/NO

Do you consent to tape recording? YES/NO

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study:

* at any time and

* without having to give a reason for withdrawing and

* without affecting your position in the University? YES / NO

Signed **Date**

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)

Note. A Chinese version is available.

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Glossary of Terms

In this section, important terms used throughout the study are defined and explained, especially those that may be ambiguous, that may not be readily understood, or that are used in a special way.

Abduction. This is a mode of inference which uses a theoretical construct of one theory about more general structures for analysing or interpreting individual events or phenomena. The idea is that the individual phenomena may be manifestations of, or part of, a general structure (Danermark et al., 2002).

Accessibility. When the term is used as a category emergent from the data in this study, it is used in a broad sense to include properties of affordability, availability of places, selectivity, and order of preference. Parents have an order of preference for the schools where they want to send their children. Whether parents can choose a school according to their preferences depends on parents' ability to afford it financially, on whether places are available in the respective schools, and on how these schools select students to fill the places. *Accessibility* is given a broader meaning here than in other studies. For example, Li et al. (2010) use the term in a narrower sense and consider affordability separately rather than as part of accessibility.

Action/interaction. *Actions* and *interactions* represent how parents handle the *central category* of being choosers under the influences of *causal conditions*, *intervening conditions*, and *contextual conditions*. Parents collect information about schools and act strategically. Use of the term is adopted from Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998).

Being like us. This represents a strategy in which parents select a school to ensure a learning environment that facilitates the reproduction of the family's cultural identity. The term's use makes reference to the notion 'like us' in Ball (2003), in Vincent et al. (2010), and in Byrne (2009).

Building a future. This represents a category of school choice strategies which give more, albeit not necessarily exclusive, emphasis to educational outcome and to a child's future. It is used to contrast with the more short-term oriented, emotionally oriented, and practical-family-needs-oriented strategies. The use of this term makes reference to the notion of 'goal-oriented/objective perspective' in Ball et al. (1996).

Capacity. When developed as a property of the category of parents as choosers, the term *capacity* describes the revealed tendency of parents either to plan strategically for years into their children's futures and then act accordingly or to focus on short-term considerations. References are made to Ball et al. (1996) and to Ball and Vincent (1998).

Causal condition. *Causal conditions* are categories of factors which have a primary influence on the central category of the phenomenon being studied. The term is adopted from Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Causality. This represents the relationship between causes and effects. In this study, *causality* is used in the *critical realist* sense: It regards causal explanations in terms of processes and mechanisms with contexts rather than statistical inference from measured covariance of variables. The term is adopted from Maxwell (2008).

Causal mechanism. *Causal mechanism*, also known as causal power, is a process's ability to happen once certain conditions are activated. The notion is vital to the explanation of causation in critical realism. For critical realists, causation has

nothing to do with the number of times things happened concurrently but is determined by causal mechanisms, how they work, and the conditions under which they exist. The term is adopted from Sayer (2000).

Central category. This is a category appearing within all cases. Other major categories can be related to it, providing a logical and consistent explanation of the research question. The term is adopted from Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Conformity. This represents the degree of similarity between schools as a result of government regulations and imposed standards.

Consequence. When using this as a category, the term represents the results of parents' actions and interactions. The term is adopted from Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998).

Contextual condition. *Contextual conditions* are the specific sets of conditions that intersect dimensionally to create the set of circumstances connected to the central category of phenomena. The term is adopted from Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Critical realism. This covers a range of versions of realism which retain an ontological position that a real world exists independently of our perceptions, whilst their interpretive epistemology accepts our understanding of the world as a construct of our own perspectives (Maxwell, 2012). The *critical realist* perspective originated in the United Kingdom with the work of Bhaskar (1975/1997). Other, more recent versions of realism with similar ontological and epistemological positions were developed by Sayer (1984, 2000, 2010a), by Archer (1995, 2000, 2003), and by Hammersley (1992, 1998, 2008). This study also draws substantially on an introductory text by Danermark et al. (2002) for the application of critical realism in the social sciences.

Cultural capital. In this study, *cultural capital* represents a parent's social position in terms of knowledge, skills, professions, languages, and dominant cultural identities. The term makes reference to Bourdieu (1986).

Deduction. This is a mode of inference by which reasoning moves from theory to operationalised concepts and on to data for testing.

Diversity. This refers to the degree of variety found between schools in terms of their curricula, their pedagogies, their media of instruction, and their modes of operation.

Economic capital. This represents the financial resources a parent has. The term is adopted from Bourdieu (1986).

EDB. This is an abbreviation for the Education Bureau of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Emergent categories. Categories developed in the analysis are *emergent categories*. Drawing on the grounded theory method and critical realism, I use the term in this study in two senses. Firstly, it is used in the grounded theory sense of categories and their properties emerging from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Secondly, categories are emergent in the sense that, whereas categories with higher levels of abstraction emerge from categories with lower levels of abstraction which, in turn, emerge from the data, emergent categories have properties which are irreducible to those of the lower level categories or of the data (Collier, 1994; Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2000).

Empowerment. When using this as a category of consequence, this represents the degree of assistance which a parent gets from the Voucher Scheme. Such assistance relates to the size of school choice sets, information about schools,

strategy migration, and *going outside the box*. In cases where the Voucher Scheme does not assist but instead has a negative effect, the term *disempowerment* is used.

Getting by. This represents the category of strategies in which a parent focusses on near-term considerations and on the practical needs of his or her family. Reference is made to the typology in Ball et al. (1995).

Grounded theory. This is a research approach which enables the researcher to generate theory from data through comparative analyses conducted purposefully, inductively, and systematically. Data collection and comparative analyses are done simultaneously in an iterative process, moving back and forth between the two until theories emerge. The approach was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Habitus. This is a notion introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1977a) to explain why people's behaviours are largely determined and regulated by our identity and our situation within a culture. *Habitus* is defined as 'an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted' (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 95).

Having a happy childhood. This represents the category of strategies in which parents give high priority to near-term educational outcomes. Included are the person-oriented/subjective perspective (Ball et al., 1996) and intrinsic personal/social aspects of schooling (Woods et al. 1998).

Induction. This is a mode of inference originating in empirical data, developing into abstract concepts, and then becoming theory.

Inquiry paradigm. This represents how we view the world, the starting points in determining the nature of inquiry for knowledge, and how such inquiry is conducted (Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Intensive research design. This is a type of research design concerning, primarily, how processes work in a small number of cases. Its purpose is to generate causal explanations of what has occurred for certain objects or for particular events, but it does not make representative generalisations (Sayer, 2010a).

Intervening condition. Categories emergent from concepts related to the external environment are thus termed. This is adopted from Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Motivation. When used as a causal conditions category, the *motivation* represents the revealed tendency of a parent to devote time and resources to his or her child's schooling as a trade-off for spending that time and those resources on other household needs. Parents who have higher expectations for their children are more motivated to spend time and resources on schooling.

Outside the box. This refers to a strategy by parents whereby they engage their children in educational activities outside of regular kindergarten schooling. *Outside the box* applies to parents who would not be able to afford such activities without vouchers.

Paradigm model. This visually assembles the categories emerging from the study, and it integrates into a set of relationships the categories' relational statements developed during the data analysis; it is adopted from Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). The word *paradigm* is here unrelated to the meaning of the same word used in *inquiry paradigm*.

Parental choice. This refers to the choice of schools by parents for their children. In this study, the term is used interchangeably with *school choice*.

Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme. This is a voucher scheme introduced in Hong Kong in 2007 subsidising kindergarten education for children aged 3 to 6 years.

Resources. When used to represent a causal condition, *resources* refer collectively to economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital.

Retroduction. This mode of inference moves from describing and analysing social phenomena to reconstructing the basic conditions needed for these phenomena to be what they are (Danermark et al., 2002).

Reflexivity. The term has two senses in this study. Firstly, it represents a reflection of how the researcher might influence the participants, the objects, and the social world which he or she studies and how he or she might be influenced by them during the research process (Maxwell, 2012). Secondly, the term is used to represent individuals' capacities for deliberations. *Reflexivity* contributes to the determination of people's behaviours in conjunction with structured and socially situated conditions (Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010). It is a rebuttal to determinism of human behaviours.

School choice. This refers to choice of schools, by parents, on children's behalves. *School choice* is used interchangeably with the term *parental choice* in this study.

Segregation. This refers to the separation of identifiable social groups in schooling.

Social capital. This is the degree to which social connections enable access to information and resources which are useful for school choice. Reference is made to Bourdieu (1986).

Sophistication. In this study, *sophistication* represents the revealed tendency of parents to search for information, to reason, and to weigh alternatives thoroughly when choosing schools. Reference is made to Ball (2003), but Ball's notion of sophistication is wider, as it also includes the ability to plan for the future and to mobilise and utilise both private and public resources for achieving planned goals. The time and resource elements are given separate attention in this study and are covered by the terms *capacity* and *resources* respectively.

Specific descriptive theory. In critical realist terminology, *specific descriptive theories* deal with specific objects of social phenomena and aim at describing and characterising structures, mechanisms, properties, and internal relations of these objects (Danermark et al., 2002).

Stigma effect. This refers to the possibility that voucher eligibility puts a stigma on schools and constitutes a factor which persuades parents to resist choosing a voucher-eligible school.

Strategy migration. This means that the Voucher Scheme, as an *intervening condition*, causes parents to change course in their strategic actions for choosing a school. It does not necessarily follow that parents completely abandon previously used strategies then move to new strategies. The migration can refer to a mere shift of priorities between several strategies used by parents.

Strategy quadrant diagram. This summarises various parental school choice strategies and their categorisation into one of four properties on the spectra of two dimensions presented in dichotomy. The aim is to position strategies, rather than parents, in the quadrant diagram. A parent may choose strategies from more than one quadrant and may adopt an eclectic approach in adopting strategies from different quadrants.

Straussian variant of grounded theory. This is one of several variants of grounded theory. The key tenets of this variant are defined in Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998).

Substantive theory. In grounded theory terminology, *substantive theory* is developed for a substantive or empirical area of sociological inquiry (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Theory. Drawing on critical realism and on the grounded theory method, *theory* in this study is for conceptualising and explaining the causal mechanism of a social phenomenon by denoting emergent categories and their properties and by interrelating them systematically (Danermark et al., 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Two-tier market. The Voucher Scheme has effectively segregated the market into two tiers, voucher eligible and non voucher eligible, and has widened the gap in tuition fees between the two.

Voucher Scheme. When capitalised, this means the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong.