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STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Child-led and interest-inspired learning, home education, learning differences and the impact of regulation

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Abstract: Research into the impact of non-consultative home education regulatory change in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, identified clear benefits of a child-led, interest-inspired approach to learning and a negative impact on student learning and well-being outcomes, particularly for learning-differenced children, of restricted practice freedom. Autoethnographic research revealed a clear difference in practice and learning outcomes pre- and post-regulatory change. A move from a flexible regulatory process which enabled child-led, interest-inspired learning, to an inflexible, strictly regulated process that restricted the possibilities for such approaches resulted in poorer learning and corroded well-being for learning-differenced students. Analysis suggests these changed regulatory processes were founded upon a particular concept of “children’s best interests” which frames all children’s needs as identical and can make individual children’s needs invisible. In this situation, the question of how children’s best interests are defined, and by whom, becomes urgent.

Subjects: Education; Education Policy & Politics; Inclusion and Special Educational Needs

Keywords: home education; homeschooling; child-led; interest-inspired; learning differences; regulation

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Giuliana Liberto is a home educator who researched the effects of regulatory change on home education practice and children’s learning and well-being. That research was prompted by her experience and observation of the impacts of restrictive and prescriptive regulatory requirements and processes for home education, which were focused more on compliance than on student need. This paper presents a portion of that work. It is applicable to broader fields of education and other caring occupations, such as mothering and foster care. Her research interests include feminist care ethics and the marginalisation of care. Her future research will continue to examine the application of policy and its impacts on mothers and children involved in home education.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Children with learning differences, who have struggled to learn in schools, often thrive in a more flexible, child-focused learning environment, such as can be provided by home education. Yet, jurisdictions that impose inflexible home education regulations that restrict child-led and interest-inspired approaches compromise children’s learning. This paper reports research that explored the consequences of restrictive home education regulation and found that inflexible regulation negatively affected children’s learning. States such as NSW, in Australia, have an obligation under the UNCRC to uphold the best interests of the child, and a legislative responsibility to ensure a quality education for each child. Inflexible regulatory requirements, which compromise some children’s learning, are, thus, at odds with the State’s responsibilities. This is an important area for research and policy discussion and the question of what constitutes, and who defines, children’s best interests, becomes urgent.

1. Introduction

Child-led and interest-inspired learning is effective and efficient, particularly in the context of an eclectic home education approach to learning differences. However, parents' ability to implement such strategies is vulnerable to regulatory attitude. This paper discusses research into the consequences of non-consultative home education regulatory change in New South Wales (NSW), an Australian state. Regulatory change significantly reduced the ability to implement child-led and interest-inspired strategies. This paper focuses on the impacts of those changes on learning-differenced children in the context of eclectic home education.

Home education is growing in popularity worldwide (see, for example, Allan & Jackson, 2010; Chapman & O'Donoghue, 2000; Jennens, 2011; Lubienski, Puckett, & Brewer, 2013). It emerged as a social movement in the 1960s, with critiques of institutional schooling from religious groups unhappy with the increasing secular nature of schools (Varnham & Squelch, 2008) and from authors such as Illich (1973) and Holt (1972). Illich stated that a "hidden curriculum"¹ which maintains inequitable and divisive social structures and upholds a normative belief that learning is only valuable when it occurs in institutions, is a by-product of institutionalised schooling (Illich, 1973, p. 9); Holt advocated "learner-directed, non-coercive, interest-inspired learning" (1972, p. 12).

Home education practices range from school-at-home (a school-like approach employing a pre-specified syllabus, timetable and text books) (see Allan & Jackson, 2010) to unschooling [child-led and interest-inspired learning, supported by adults without the use of pre-planned curricula, undertaken in the world and able to meet individual needs (Gray & Riley, 2013)]. Eclectic home educators draw on a range of educational options, which may include unschooling, parent-led and co-designed learning strategies (Allan & Jackson, 2010).² Although home education practices can replicate those of institutions, they frequently differ from classroom approaches to learning (Allan & Jackson, 2010; Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Croft, 2013; English, 2013; Ensign, 2000; Hanna, 2012; Harding, 2011; Kunzman, 2009; Rothermel, 2002; Watt, 2012). Whatever the approach, home education tends to incorporate more one-on-one attention and individually tailored learning strategies than institutional education (see, e.g. Meighan, in Broadhurst, 1999; Gray & Riley, 2013), often allowing for interest-driven and informal learning (Thomas & Pattison, 2007), or learning through everyday life and play (Gray & Riley, 2013).

In Australia, home education is legal and regulated by the states. Regulation continually evolves and this impacts on home education practice. Recent regulatory changes in NSW significantly reduced flexibility for home educators, particularly the ability to implement child-led, interest-inspired strategies. Jackson and Allan (2010) note that home education practices are enabled or impeded to the extent that regulation recognises a parental right to choose the manner of a child's education. Moreover, home education practices that are least school-like in appearance are most affected by regulations that do not recognise the unique nature of those forms of home education (note, e.g. Hanna, 2012).

A recent inquiry into home education in NSW received testimonials suggesting that child-led, interest-inspired strategies are effective in mitigating learning difficulties (see, for example, Hayes, 2014; Home Education Association, 2014). This is in keeping with Ensign (2000) who found from a longitudinal study that home educating parents of children with learning differences (giftedness or difficulties) employ different strategies from those of special education teachers, and achieved better outcomes overall. This is significant when you consider that, in Australia, an increasing number of parents is choosing to home educate because their learning-differenced children's needs are not being met in school (Select Committee on Home Schooling, 2014) and are finding that strategies that differ from school prove to be effective, but restricted by regulation (Home Education Association, 2014; Select Committee on Home Schooling, 2014).

1.1. Child-led, interest-inspired learning

A range of different terms and interpretations relating to child-led learning have been used over time and in different places, such as in academic and informal, practitioner-driven, educational discussions. Holt (1972, p. 12) advocates “learner-directed, non-coercive, interest-inspired learning”; Mintz (2004, cited in Ricci, 2012) states that learner-centred education [is] “an approach that is based on the interest of the student rather than curriculum driven, where someone else has the idea of what you ought to be learning”.

In 2014, in NSW, following significant lobbying against non-consultative home education regulatory change that restricted home education practice approach, an inquiry was held into home education—the NSW Legislative Council Select Committee Inquiry into Home Schooling (the Inquiry). The committee reported that child-led learning was associated with non-school-like approaches to home education (Select Committee on Home Schooling, 2014). Material presented to the inquiry showed that both eclectic and unschooling approaches included opportunities for child-led and interest-inspired learning. Researchers such as English (2013, 2015) and Ricci (2012) also discuss this connection.

1.2. Personal background to research

Our family has been home educating for a decade. Our approach is eclectic, relational and responsive to our children’s and our family’s needs and interests, allowing ample opportunity for child-led and interest-inspired learning. The children are registered with the NSW Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES) for home education, which is a legal requirement.

We enjoyed our first few registration visits. The Authorised Persons (APs), whose job it is to inspect our “home school” and recommend for or against registration engaged with all of us in a positive way. They told my husband and me that they could see that the children were thriving and learning; some said that they wished they had home educated their own children. This experience was common amongst home educators that we knew.

This situation changed markedly during 2011/12, and became official through the Homeschooling Information Package (IP) produced in 2013 (2013 IP³), as well as the Authorised Persons Handbook. Regulation now focused on a school-based model of education (Home Education Association, 2014; Submission 64–Name Suppressed, 2014), enforced a particular scope and sequence in curricula, prohibited inclusion of activities taught outside the home and by anyone other than the parent in the educational plan and excluded travel-based learning and APs were insisting that home educators have a timetable detailing nominated hours of schooling (Home Education Association, 2014; Office of the Board of Studies NSW, 2013; Submission 64–Name Suppressed, 2014). After complaints from home educators, BoSTES produced a companion Question and Answer document (Q&A) to clarify the requirements, but again failed to consult the home education community. The IP and Q&A documents contradicted each other and appeared to be focused on compliance,⁴ rather than on individual children’s learning and well-being (Home Education Association, 2014).

Registration visits had become adversarial, focused on regulatory compliance, rather than on children’s learning and well-being. This was reported in multiple submissions to the inquiry.⁵ One AP, for example, told a mother her children should not learn academic content outside their nominated grade level, despite one of her children being gifted and others having learning differences and difficulties (Submission 166–Name Suppressed, 2014). This contradicted the requirements for registration as set out in the 2013 IP, which state that children’s learning needs must be accommodated (Office of the Board of Studies NSW, 2013). Another example involved a child with learning difficulties who had been self-harming in school, but had recovered emotionally and educationally at home as a result of an individually tailored education programme that allowed time for recovery and interest-inspired learning (Hayes, 2014). Despite the expectation that home educators will meet the learning needs of their children (Office of the Board of Studies NSW, 2013), this child was threatened by the AP with a forced return to school if he did not produce much more written work, re-awakening

his previous anxiety and impeding his learning (Hayes, 2014). These episodes demonstrated a focus on externally imposed learning activities and a disregard for children's needs and interests. Submissions to the inquiry, including the Home Education Association's (HEA's) submission, showed that these were not isolated incidents.⁶

Legislation in NSW provides the basis for registration. The Education Act (1990) mandates key learning areas and stipulates that education programmes must be based on a BoSTES-approved syllabus. Whilst the principles of the Act seek to ensure a parent-state balance in educational responsibility and duty, the revised home education regulations shifted the balance towards the state. The 2013 IP provides an effective illustration of this point. Key sentences were deleted (bolded below) and reflect the decreasing flexibility in practice allowed to home-educators:

As with other forms of education there is no single approach to home schooling. **Some home educators have a structured approach that is based upon a set timetable and formal instruction. Others prefer an approach that is less formal and responds to the child's developing interests and needs.** (Select Committee on Home Schooling, 2014)

The 2013 Information Package now reads:

As with other forms of education, there is no single approach to home schooling. Regardless of the approach to teaching, the educational philosophy that might be adopted and/or the learning context for each child, the requirements for registration must be met at all times during any period of registration (Office of the Board of Studies NSW, 2013)⁷

This emphasis leads to conflict for parents attempting to allow children to direct the nature and/or content of their learning, as identified in numerous submissions to the Inquiry (Select Committee on Home Schooling, 2014). Previously, parents were able to practise child-led, interest-inspired learning by demonstrating how it met curriculum requirements across grades/stages. A new requirement that families not teach outside the grade/stage for which their child was registered, or in any way alter their educational plan without first seeking regulatory approval, significantly restricted this possibility. This appeared to conflict with the requirement to meet children's learning needs. Conflict of this kind and the bind in which it placed home educators motivated my research.

2. Method

My research was autoethnographic and applied a postmodern feminist theoretical framework to my experience of non-consultative home education regulatory change, with particular emphasis on the impacts of regulation on practice possibilities and how this affected children's learning and well-being. Merging autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010), the autoethnographic researcher studies her/his own culture or personal experience, applying a critical lens to the resultant observations, thus grounding the experiences in the sociocultural context (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Ellis et al., 2010; Reed-Danahay, 2009; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). I generated data using Richardson's proposed research method, writing-as-inquiry, which employs "the narrative both as a means of 'knowing' and as a method of 'telling' the sociological" (Richardson, 1997, p. 58). This is a written method of both collecting and recording data akin to journaling; the data are subsequently subjected to analysis.

I undertook a four stage research process over nine months in 2015. Stages One and Two involved generating data in response to my experience of the impacts of non-consultative home education regulatory change. I wrote about my reactions to my personal experience, as well as to others' stories contained in submissions and evidence to the inquiry and to the inquiry report.⁸ In addition to writing in response to these materials, I used some of their content as data. Informed by Braun and Clarke's guide to thematic analysis (2006), Stage Three involved thematic analysis of semantic and latent content in the data.

During Stage Four, the insights drawn from my analysis were read against literature “with the intention to create conditional statements about the implications of [my] analyses” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 508) of the effects of non-consultative regulatory change on home education practice and children’s learning and well-being.

2.1. Data and discussion

My data contained two distinct bodies of material. The first described and reflected on our family’s practices which began prior to and remained untouched by regulatory change. This was predominantly autoethnographic in form. The other concerned negative outcomes of regulatory change and contained my responses to them. These data consisted of additional autoethnographic writing, as well as material from the Inquiry submissions and transcripts.

2.1.1. First body of data

The autoethnographic data relating to our untouched practices described my view of our eclectic home education approach, which was responsive to our children’s learning and well-being needs.

There are multiple prompts for the methods that we use, some of which are child-led and some parent-led, often in response to an initial interest expressed by our children. For example, some years ago Jamie⁹ wanted to learn to read. At that time s/he¹⁰ spent significant amounts of time with younger children who were precocious readers. Jamie’s (at that point undiagnosed) dyslexia meant that learning in this area was a struggle. This impacted on Jamie’s sense of ability as s/he compared h’self¹¹ to those friends.

My autoethnographic writing showed how my eclectic approach allowed me to balance parent-led and child-led learning in a way that supported Jamie’s original desire to read, ultimately allowing this child to read successfully, supporting self-esteem and enhancing an ability to pursue Jamie’s own learning interests:

We pursue a good balance of child-led and parent-instigated learning. Jamie’s reading program targets Jamie’s needs and I instigated it ... because s/he believed h-self to be stupid, was angry and actively stopped trying to learn, BUT ... Jamie is now an avid reader. S/he reads books, listens to them repeatedly as audiobooks, sometimes watches films of the books s/he reads And learns and learns and learns. It is exciting to watch ...

The following excerpt provides one example of the ways in which reading supports Jamie’s child-led and interest-inspired learning:

... by the time s/he was 8 or 9, s/he had read the entire Harry Potter series of books ... [and has now] found a friend who likes imaginary play and created ... stories which combine components of all these stories to create new and innovative worlds of Jamie’s own. This is excellent English and Creative Arts learning, as well as self-development.

My writing highlighted that our practice took advantage of happenstance and my children’s interests to harness their enthusiasm and intellect. Jamie is, for example, intensely interested in the animal world and had instigated some dissections far earlier than they occur in the NSW syllabus. Following that,

On a visit to see Nanna, we found cicadas EVERYWHERE. Jamie observed them, photographed them, we researched them, read newspaper articles about them, identified the species, Jamie dissected a dead one and created a powerpoint presentation which s/he delivered to us. Jamie discovered that s/he could write a script and record it orally, so spelling wasn’t a disadvantage ...¹² This is immersion, opportunity- and interest-led learning that is multi-sensory and cross-curricular AND EFFECTIVE.

This extract describes an instance of flexible and effective child-led, interest-inspired learning.

The children themselves, and our family as a whole, determined our learning and living processes. As previous extracts show, we responded creatively to their needs and interests. I had described an approach to education that naturally incorporated child-led and interest-inspired learning into the flow of our lives, supporting our children's learning and well-being. Our learning was accessible to us all and we grew together. My data showed that our approach harnessed all our strengths and was fun. For example: *Responding to a story that Jamie read aloud on a car trip, we ... [spontaneously] created a poem which s/he later copied out and illustrated.* As Richardson (1997) and Pelias (2011) claim it does, (my) writing clarified what I hadn't consciously known—our educational process—such that I could articulate it. I came to understand my child's dyslexia as a blip and that what is a learning difference ... is only [a] disability if you go to school.

2.1.2. Second body of data

The second body of data detailed more strongly the impacts of the new regulatory constraints on child-led and interest-inspired learning in my home and how frustrated I was that this impacted negatively on learning. For example, I wrote:

Stress and grumpiness impact negatively on relationship. I have enforced more bookwork, pushed beyond [my child's] capability in terms of stamina (with dyslexia, Jamie tires and can no longer work effectively or efficiently). I have felt stressed and anxious and passed that onto my children. "We have to do more or we won't get registered." This stress has resulted in difficult days, irritability and impatience and these have bled into our lives.

I was stressed by the regulatory constraints as well as being concerned that my practices had become unresponsive to my children's learning and well-being needs, as I had become focused on box-ticking. I felt that I was forcing Jamie to complete many more book-based activities, hence exhausting my child. The more tired Jamie became the less this learning-differenced child learnt and the less time we had to focus on methods that worked and consolidated Jamie's learning. I wrote:

An inspector stated that 40% [of] time [is] not accounted for by syllabus requirements, but what if you have a child who has learning difficulties? You never get to stuff they find interesting and can do!

I began to comment on this process and name the consequences in my writing-as-inquiry, which led to my realisation that restricted and inflexible practices cause *the things that are disabilities in school [to] become disabilities at home.*

Often, my decisions about what would be most enabling, based on experience and professional advice sought by me over the years for both my children, and which included child-led and interest-inspired learning, were contrary to the dictates of the regulations and did not tick the regulator's (BoSTES') boxes. Whilst BoSTES enjoined home educators to meet their children's learning needs, there was also an expectation of adherence to a narrow model of what that might be and a requirement that home educators sought approval each time we wished to adapt our practice¹³ (in Office of the Board of Studies NSW, 2013). I wrote, for example:

We are meant to meet the needs of our children and can extend them, we are also meant to teach within the grade/stage they are registered for ... we cannot engage tutors or external programs and we must stick to the plan unless we seek permission to change it—do I prevent [them] playing and integrating what [they] learn in order to follow a school-like plan that is failing [them], until I can arrange a registration visit ... by which time [they] will no longer be interested in what [they have] been doing, nor will it be relevant to what [they are] currently learning, the result of which will be that I can't let [them] do what [they] need to do because I can't tell the inspector what that will be—or we can't count it as school.

These extracts demonstrate the intensity of my frustration with inflexible regulatory processes due to my experience of them harming my own and other children's learning and well-being.

2.2. Commentary

My autoethnographic data described the ways in which child-led, interest-inspired learning promoted learning and well-being and mitigated learning difficulties. It also described the impact of requiring pedagogical practices that tire the learning-differenced student and increase the need for remedial bookwork: learning is less effective and efficient, impacting negatively on both learning and well-being outcomes such as self-esteem and mental health. This reflects the body of research that demonstrates the benefits of child-led and interest-inspired learning (see, e.g. Ensign, 2000; Maynard, Waters, & Clement, 2013). Given this, it is interesting to note that research shows that home educators, including those who have trained or worked as teachers, tend to evolve more flexible, child-led and interest-inspired practices over time (see, e.g. Croft, 2013; English, 2013; Jackson, 2009; Reilly, 2007).

Regulatory policies and processes impact on the educational methods and strategies that can be employed by home educators. Home education practices which are least school-like in appearance, such as child-led and interest-inspired learning are most affected by regulations that do not recognise the nature and effectiveness of those practices. One of the problems arising from the non-consultative home education regulatory changes in NSW was the curtailment of child-led and interest-inspired learning and the consequent negative impacts on student learning and well-being.

Current NSW regulatory policies and processes fail to recognise, or take into account, the holistic needs of individual children. A consequence is that, in practice, the possibility for flexible home education practices, including child-led and interest-inspired learning approaches, is restricted. In NSW, the State has a legislated duty to ensure a quality education for each child (Education Act 1990 (NSW)). Moreover, as Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROc), NSW is compelled to uphold the UNCROc's concept of "the child's best interests" (UN General Assembly 1989, Article 3). As regulatory bodies respond to legislative obligations and those arising from ratification of the UNCROc by creating blunt policy instruments at a macro level to protect children as a category, parents respond at a micro level to individual children and sometimes find that inflexibly applied policy obstructs specific children's best interests (exemplified in Home Education Association, 2014; see, also, English, 2013).

Further illustrating this conflict, some members of the Inquiry committee attempted to include a recommendation to amend legislation to remove parental responsibility for a child's education and replace it with "*decisions relating to the education of each child should be made by a reference to the paramount interests of that child*" (Select Committee on Home Schooling, 2014, p. 332, italics in original). These changes would shift greater power for decision-making relating to children to the State. Given the regulatory and political wariness of approaches that incorporate child-led and interest-inspired learning, and the recent less flexible regulatory attitude, it is realistic to expect that these approaches would be perceived to be counter to the child's best interests. This is exemplified in the inquiry committee's comment,

Whilst the committee received evidence about the unschooling method, or natural learning as it may be called, it does not believe that such an approach works on a practical level in a way that would achieve quality educational outcomes for the child. (Select Committee on Home Schooling, 2014, p. 16)

In practice, this restricts parents' ability to implement child-led, interest-inspired practices, thereby undermining some children's learning and well-being.

The failure to consider the holistic needs of individual children is related to the current NSW child-focused, social investment sociocultural context, which is similar to that described by Lister (2006), writing in the UK New Labour context. In this framework, children are viewed as “a unified, homogenous, undifferentiated ... category” (Dobrowolsky, cited in Lister, 2006, p. 317) which frames all children’s needs as identical and can make individual children’s needs invisible. Thus, the question of how children’s best interests are defined, and by whom, becomes urgent.

3. Conclusions

My research revealed that child-led, interest-inspired learning mitigated learning difficulties. Less flexible regulatory policies and processes impacted negatively on student learning by restricting the opportunity for child-led, interest-inspired learning. Some learners require a different approach to be successful. Whilst, technically, child-led and interest-inspired learning remains possible when 40% of “school” time is unallocated by regulation (personal communication from a Bostes inspector), in practice the regulatory changes curtailed the possibility by mandating that content be delivered under specific circumstances (for example, by the parent in the home; not outside the year levels for which registration had been granted; and with restricted ability to respond to children’s agency and interests). This resulted in less effective learning and compromised well-being.

3.1. Recommendations

Research focusing on child-led, interest-inspired learning in the context of learning differences and in home education and democratic school contexts would be beneficial. Further, longitudinal research should be conducted to assess the short- and long-term benefits of child-led and interest-inspired educational approaches. Finally, regulatory policy should be developed in consultation with key stakeholders with a recognition that parents are likely to have particular knowledge of, and commitment to, children’s best interests.

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Notes

1. The term “hidden curriculum”, coined by Snyder (1970), refers to how unspoken rules and cultural expectations are passed on without overt instruction.
2. See Allan and Jackson (2010) for a brief overview of some of the most common approaches to home education.
3. The Information Package, as well as the Authorised Persons Handbook and Question and Answers documents referred to later can be found at: <https://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/home-schooling/> These documents are continually updated and new versions may have been released since publication of this paper.
4. The word *comply* appears seven times in the IP, a 41-page document; *compliance* appears seven times; and *complies* appears once (see Office of the Board of Studies NSW, 2013).
5. Submissions made to the inquiry can be found at: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/committee.nsf/V3ListSubmissions?open&ParentUNID=A03FC5A78BDCFA19CA257CE6007FEF72>
6. The Home Education Association (HEA) is a national member-based association, run by volunteers, that represents, supports and advocates for home educators in Australia.

7. Regulatory practices are in constant flux. At the time of writing, the NSW Home Education Information Package (IP) was due for review.
8. The inquiry report (Select Committee on Home Schooling, 2014) and all other materials relating to the inquiry can be found at <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/Pages/committeeprofile/home-schooling.aspx>
9. A gender-neutral name has replaced the real name in order to maintain anonymity and obscure gender.
10. She is used to obscure gender in order to maintain anonymity.
11. H'self is used to obscure gender in order to maintain anonymity.
12. Dyslexia makes spelling a challenge for Jamie such that s/he can either spell or concentrate on other learning; doing both simultaneously is counter-productive to learning.
13. There is a contention over the exact meaning and effect of the changed regulations. When home educators contacted BoSTES and questioned details in the 2013 IP, BoSTES did not withdraw or amend the package as requested. Instead, a “Question and Answer” document was created. This states that many of the requirements listed in the IP were not to be taken literally (for example, education having to be delivered only by the parent and in the home). At the same time, the discrepancy between the two documents and the fact that the IP is the parent document means that the final decision can be differentially applied and that power rests in the hands of the regulators.

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