

## Home education transitions with formal schooling: Student perspectives

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Home education is a well established phenomenon in Australia but little is known about the movement of students between home schooling and formal education and how students view and handle the transitions. A sociocultural theoretical framework has been used to explore student perceptions of their transition experiences between formal education and home schooling through three case studies. Students described positive and negative views, and experiences of both systems of education. The results of the study uncover areas for further research into the role of education professionals on student experiences, the place of home education in relation to formal education and assessment of collaborative educational programmes which combine aspects of formal education with home education.

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### Introduction

Home education in Australia appears to be well established. It is legally recognised in every state of Australia. While there is a small and growing Australian research literature, there has been no research on the movements of home educated students between their home study programs and traditional schools and other formal educational institutions. Student views and experiences of the transition process have been used as a starting point for developing an appropriate theory which could inform professional and parental practices through these types of transitions.

Research overseas indicates that home education is a growing phenomenon (Princiotta, Bielick, & Chapman, 2006). Studies have found that students tend to achieve well academically (Brown, 1992; Gray, 1998; Rothermel, 2004) and are generally socially competent (Medlin, 2000; Rothermel, 2002; Shyers, 1992; and Taylor, 1986).

There have been few Australian studies of home schooled students academic achievements. The little research work found indicated that student academic achievement was generally average to well above average (Harding, 2003a; McColl, 2005; Simich, 1998; Thomas, 1998). Social development was reviewed in a number of Australian studies (Barratt-Peacock, 1997; Brosan, 1991; Broadhurst, 1999; Clery, 1998; Krivanek, 1988; Simich, 1998; Thomas, 1998). The Australian findings in this area also support the findings given in overseas literature which indicate that

home educated students are generally socially well adjusted and have a healthy self-esteem.

Student views of their home education experience have also been researched in several Australian studies (Broadhurst, 1999; Clery, 1998; Honeybone, 2002; and McColl, 2005). Students have generally reported positively about their home education experience. The few comments made about missing peers at school were generally tempered by the benefits of being able to learn flexibly at their own pace. Self-esteem appeared to be healthy among these students with a number of them crediting their own healthy self image directly to their home education experiences.

Most overseas literature on home education and transition experiences with formal institutions has been generated in the United States of America with some work having been conducted in Great Britain. Five of these studies focused on home educated student entrance to tertiary level institutions or the work place (Goymer, 2001; Gray, 1998; Holder, 2001; Jenkins, 1998; Lattibaudiere, 2000; Prue, 1997). They found that students adjusted well academically and socially to post secondary institutions or the workforce and often better than many of their formally educated peers.

There have also been overseas studies focusing on interactions between home education and formal primary or secondary schools (Adams, 1992; Davis, 2000; Fairchild, 2002; Golding, 1995; Hanna, 1996; Krout, 2001; Stoppler, 1998). Four of these studies discussed various aspects of the interplay between home schooling and formal schooling, especially from an administrative point of view. Topics ranged around attitudes of superintendents, home schooler access to school resources and partnerships between public schools and home educators indicating that home schooled students were moving between the two systems and sometimes making use of both at the same time.

There were three overseas studies which examined the movement of students between home schooling and formal education (Krout, 2001; Snyder, 2005; Stoppler, 1998). Stoppler indicated that parents returned children to formal schools because they believed that it was in the best interests of the child even though these needs varied between families and children. Snyder found that home educated students generally adjusted well into formal schools both academically and socially. In a study of the entrance of children from three families into formal education, it was found that these families sent their children to school to encourage the development of social skills with professionals and peers (Krout, 2001). Krout found that the support from teachers was haphazard and focused on academic matters rather than student emotional needs and felt that schools needed to be proactive with home schooled children to empower them in the process of transition – both prior to the move and in the early

period of the transition to school. She also felt that healthy social relationships were the key to successful entrance. As a result of her study she recommended that part-time enrolment be considered as an option for some students.

In Australia, there have been several studies on why parents choose home education (Barratt-Peacock 1997; Habibullah 2004; Harding 1997; Harp 1998; Honeybone 2002; Hunter 1994; Jacob, Barratt-Peacock, Carins, Holderness-Roddam, Home, & Shipway 1991; Jeffries & Giskes 2004; New South Wales Office of the Board of Studies (OBOS) 2004; Patrick 1999; Simich 1998; Thomas 1998), how they conduct their home schooling programs (Jacobs et al. 1991; Barratt-Peacock, 1997; Habibullah, 2004; Simich 1998; Thomas 1998) and the law (Education Queensland 2003; Harding & Farrell 2003; Jackson 1999; Jacob et al. 1991; Jeffries & Giskes 2004; OBOS, 2004). However, there do not appear to be any studies which have looked at the movement of students into or out of formal education. This paper explores the experiences of three such students, all of whom have moved into or out of formal education and engaged in home education at some point of their student life.

## **Theoretical perspectives**

Sociocultural theory as described by Rogoff (1990, 2003) has been used to inform this study. She discussed the need to assess situations from various perspectives. The student point of view is perhaps the most important aspect of the transition experience. Other aspects of these students' stories are found by looking at their environment. These include students' views of their families and the institutions with which they have interfaced.

Student voices need to be heard in order that deeper issues of power can be considered because each individual has privileged knowledge of their own selves (Delpit, 1988). Institutional misunderstanding of student motives has, in the past, led to conflict creating practices by institutions which have further alienated struggling students (Hedegaard, 2005). Rogoff (1990) used three lenses to understand the development of individuals within a sociocultural framework. These lenses allowed one to focus on an individual, their relationship with others and the cultural environment in which they are immersed. In this study, these lenses have been useful for helping to uncover those areas of privileged knowledge held by students and the tensions between institutional practices and the students' best interests. Students who have experienced transition between home education and formal education have also been silenced by the failure of mainstream educational researchers to see home education as a worthwhile research topic. Student views and experiences are a valuable way to enrich mainstream understanding, and open otherwise closed topics for discussion.

## Methodology

A qualitative study was chosen to investigate the formal/home schooling transition experiences of students. This gave students the central voice to inform the research of their 'life world' and show how they constructed meaning from this (Kvale, 1996). Interviews were used to collect data from students. The social interaction of the interview allowed for open exploration of topics as they arose while semi structured guide questions created a loose framework which gave some continuity to the interviews.

The guide questions used in this study inquired about the positive and negative perceptions students had of their formal schooling and home education, as well as their transition experiences. They were also asked for a description of their experiences in each system. A final question asked students if they had any comments for education professionals.

## Case studies

The views and experiences of the three students who have made transitions between formal education and home schooling are not necessarily representative of all home schooled students who have experienced this type of transition, as each case is unique. However, despite the individuality of the three students, there are some important points of commonality between their experiences of formal education and home education.

Zara, who started her education formally for four and a half years, spent approximately four years in home education and then personally chose to return to formal education. Her two experiences with formal education were vastly different emotionally and academically. Sam had experienced formal education but left at age eight to do home schooling. Robert introduced himself as 'hating' home schooling and had definite views on the differences between home education and formal education.

### Zara

At the time of the interview, Zara was fifteen. She had started primary school in a private, religious and very academically focused, school. Before the first year had concluded, the family doctor advised her mother to remove her from the school as she had developed severe stomach ulcers. Her parents then put her in a local state school which had a reputation for being a 'good school'. Half way through Year 4 her mother, in frustration with the system, withdrew Zara and her younger brother when she collected a school report with the comment: 'We are sure Zara has capabilities but we do not know what they are'. Her mother, who was not a formally trained teacher, withdrew both children in order to rebuild their

education at home. The parents also told both children that they could return to school when they could present an acceptable argument supporting their choice.

After four years of home education, Zara decided to return to school in the last term of Year eight. After writing out two lists outlining the benefits of home education and of formal education, she decided that formal education had two more advantages and so she asked to return to school. Her parents were a little concerned that she might struggle socially and academically. This was clearly not the case as Zara was able to score a B+ for Indonesian which she had only learnt during that term and the school was so impressed with her natural leadership abilities that they asked her to be part of their small elite State Emergency Service group for which there were eighty other applicants. She settled in happily with the girls of her class, and even though, in terms of age, she probably should have been in Year nine, her parents decided not to disturb her and left her with that group the following year. She continued competently and happily through school.

### **Sam**

At the time of the interview, Sam was a ten year old who had come out of school when he was eight. During the course of the interview, Sam's academic interests and abilities were marked and seemed different from those of other children his age. He had an almost complete collection of Melway maps and had created a predictive map to indicate future areas for new maps. He could also accurately describe historical changes in previous Melway editions.

During the entire interview, Sam paced the floor, interrupting and clarifying questions continually. At many points, his eyes filled with tears and he was often unable to speak. Sam was continually comforted by his mother, especially when reference was made to formal schooling.

### **Robert**

At the time of the interview, Robert was seventeen. In year nine, Robert's family travelled to Europe for one year. During this time his parents enrolled him with Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) as it was the only home schooling programme of which they were aware. When he returned to school, he also shifted to a private high school in a new state which further complicated his transition back into formal education. At the end of year twelve, Robert achieved a Tertiary Enter Score of over 98.

## Analysis

Students were asked to describe their positive and negative experiences of both formal schooling and home education.

### Positive comments about home education

Zara, liked home schooling for many reasons but most centred around feeling comfortable, being with supportive and understanding parents, lack of feeling pressured and the ability to ask for and receive help as soon as she needed it. She believed that her parents' personal knowledge of, and respect for, her made them her most effective teachers.

Zara: Just the ableness to go to my parents ... when I need it. ... If I don't understand, I'm allowed to ... stop for a little while and think about it and go back to it.

Interviewer: Why was it so good to be home schooled?

Zara: Because, you got to ... learn different things that other people couldn't teach you. Your parents have that special bond with you that teachers just don't have.

Interviewer: That was important to you?

Zara: That was VERY important because I could go to them with anything! I couldn't go to ... teachers and stuff, because they didn't understand as well as parents do.

She felt that her learning at home was more efficient and thorough than it had been at school.

Zara: I understand things a lot more because ... when I was home schooled I got to ... learn a lot more stuff than I thought I would have learnt at school because I could ... you know, I just absorb it more ...

Home education social opportunities were important. She appreciated the home schooling network to which the family belonged.

Zara: Well, when we were... home schooled, we went out like every couple of days and went to a sporting thingy with the rest of the home schooling ... we socialised, we played games, we did crafts, we did sports, we did cooking, we did everything!

Interviewer: And you liked that?

Zara: I loved that. That was the best part of my entire week.

Interviewer: Because you were with people?

Zara: Yeah. Like all my friends and stuff. ...

In spite of missing school friends, Zara still thought home education was the right choice.

Zara: It was still good. I loved it.

At home, she felt that she came to know her own person and really appreciated that privilege. It was at home where she developed a healthy self-concept – not at school.

Zara: When ... I was home schooled, I developed a lot more self-esteem than I did when I was at school. ... before I was home schooled I was really shy. ... I was one of those people that just sat in a corner and just listened rather than spoke up. Now [I'm] exactly the opposite. ... I've realised that ... I'm a person, that ... no one's going to tease me for telling my opinion. No one's going to bully me for ... saying what I feel.

Sam was relieved to be at home. He loved being able to select topics and then become engrossed in huge research type projects. He also felt that home education had given him the opportunity to make accepting friendships. He liked everything about home schooling. He especially liked the fact that he could learn anything without it being 'stuffed down your throat' and he did not have to learn in a fixed slot of time every day. Learning happened in any place at any time. Home education in this family was based on the children's interests. Sam believed that his mother did not really teach him anything.

Sam: You (to Mum) didn't teach us anything did yah? Huh? I teach myself stuff. ... I don't need a teacher to tell me stuff! (Later he added) ... Mum doesn't actually work any classes. We ... don't have a timetable. ... We just do it natural learning. Like we learn what we want to learn about when we want to learn it.

Constructing his predictive Melway maps or writing story books and their sequels was not what Sam interpreted as 'learning'.

Sam: No, that's just doing something.

When he wanted to learn something, he would ask questions and set about his own research in the local library.

Sam: Well ... I ask questions, about it. ... and I like to go to the library and get ... books. I ... look up on the library catalogue to see if I can find ...any books to find out whatever I have a question about.

Friendships were also an important part of home schooling for Sam. He enjoyed friendships with various neighbours and home schooling associations.

Sam: Yes and I like friends

Robert had originally introduced himself as a person who 'hated' home schooling. In spite of this dislike, he gave a number of reasons for finding home education worthwhile. He found it very focusing, enabling him to

follow subjects that interested him, less restrictive and he felt that with all its perceived handicaps, it had not prejudiced his academic capacity but had enhanced his return to formal education. When he first began his home education, Robert was excited as it was a new experience; he had already met some other friendly home educators. In the prepared curriculum he used, a wide range of interesting electives were offered that were not available in formal schooling and these opened up new horizons for him.

Robert: Oh, I was pretty excited 'cause it was something new. I was seeing new people who were doing home schooling so I kind of knew like all the good stuff about it. ... I don't have to go to school ... I know I'll still get heaps of work done. I can rush ahead if I want to, so I kind of already knew what the advantages of it, or all the good parts of it. ... it would give me a break from normal school ... I was doing ... something which I really liked, especially ... the electives ... I clicked well with them.

Other positive aspects of home education included things like the fact that he could focus on a topic without distractions and work at his own pace without being restricted to the rest of the class. He could also make decisions about how and when and what he learnt.

Robert: It was focused. And, there wasn't so many distractions ... And you could work at your own pace. Which was good. So you weren't kind of restricted to what the rest of the class restricted to. ... You're in control of how you're studying. ... I'd read it, extract the kind of information which was given and then ... learn it. ... So you ... decide how you want to learn the thing ... you don't have to either learn it by ... essay or the work sheets the teacher gives you, you can learn it the way you wanted to, sort of.

Robert wanted to learn with like minded peers, in real world settings, not through distant texts whether at school or in home schooling.

Both Zara and Robert noted that home education allowed them to proceed at their own pace without the stigma of feeling they were the slowest student in the class. Robert and Sam appreciated working at their own pace and not being restricted to the average pace of the class. All three commented favourably about their autonomy.

### **Positive comments about school**

Students were asked to describe the positive aspects of school as they perceived them. All three had started their education at school while Zara and Robert had experienced school a second time when they re-entered formal education.



The first years of schooling for both Zara and Sam had been very stressful emotionally. Note Zara's first comments.

Zara: I didn't like it. I absolutely hated it. I wanted to be sick every single day. When I got to school, I said, 'Mum, I don't want to go to school today, can I...'

Interviewer: Can you remember that clearly?

Zara: Yeah, I remember that VERY clearly.

When reminded that the question asked for the positive features of formal schooling, Zara's description of why she liked school was unique.

Zara: I liked the school at the beginning because it gave my parents like a thing that they could work on, like, build up in me.

Interviewer: So you think that going to school at the beginning sort of showed ... why you needed to do home schooling?

Zara: Yes

Again, when Zara was asked if it might have been more beneficial if she had started off with home education, she disagreed. She felt that she needed to attend school first in order to better understand why she needed to be home educated.

Zara: No. I wouldn't have known that because I was ... one of those people that ...you don't know, you're not sure about yourself ... but when, I was home, my family ... were very supportive and they ... tried to build me up on my weaknesses ...

Finding positive memories of her early years in formal school were difficult.

Zara: I can't really remember them.

She was however, very happy to be with her friends at recess and lunch times. The institution of school and the problems it caused were not related to her social opportunities at school.

Zara: I was happy ... NO, not like at school, at school. I was happy at like lunch time and stuff but ...

Sam's response when asked what he liked about school was intense. He was on the verge of tears when he responded:

Sam: Oh well not much. ... Just about nothing.

He insisted on describing how school had been disappointingly easy 'like how to count to ten [when] I can do my twenty-four times tables'. He asked what he was supposed to like about work that was too easy.

Sam: They tried to stuff things down your throat! Information, and I already knew what they were trying to teach me.

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He eventually exploded with the following.

Sam: I told you what I liked about school which was nothing (Vehemently) and what I didn't like about school which was everything (Vehemently).

Robert, in contrast, had been happy and diligent at his first school. His home education experiences taught him what he appreciated about school. Being able to ask questions and receive prompt help from teachers was important, while having teachers who could put his learning into context or create the bigger picture was also important. Having the odd bit of fun, like throwing a paper plane was also therapeutic on occasions as this relieved the intensity of study.

Robert: ... there was teachers so you could always ask if you need help. There was always people to discuss things with. ... And there was always things just to do during the break, AND you could always muck up. There wasn't school work all the time. If you didn't feel like doing school work you just stuffed around. ... You just didn't have to always be focused on school work, 'cause in home schooling you just do this, but with normal schooling you could, you know, throw a bit of paper or do something trivial ...

Only Zara and Robert returned to school. Robert found it difficult, but that seemed to have been more related to the fact that it was a new school in a new State rather than simply a transition from home schooling to formal education.

Zara made her own choice to return to school. Before returning, she was apprehensive about whether or not she would be able to keep up with her peers but her nervousness only lasted about three days and she settled in with enthusiasm. Most of her positive comments related to the friendliness, inclusiveness and helpfulness of the teachers. She did not mention friends as an important part of the transition process although her mother mentioned that she got on well with her peers. Zara's comments about teachers in her second experience of formal education reflect both the professional approach of her teachers and her own maturity in viewing some of the problems associated with formal schooling.

Zara: Yeah, I liked everything almost about it. ... the teachers were really friendly when I met them first and they were very understanding if I didn't get something because it was ... They [teachers] were just automatically nice and I thought that was really nice because ... it made me feel more welcome. ... That's one of the good things on schooling. ... Teachers now just like listening to your ideas and stuff. They appreciate your point of view. They don't want to say, 'Your turn next. Stop there, your turn' and get through all of them. You can have ... like a whole lesson of just talking about one particular thing.

### **Negative comments about home education**

The second group of questions centred on the negative perceptions students had of both home schooling and formal schooling. Student dislikes of home education were discussed first.

Zara and Sam did not identify many negative aspects of home education. Their negative school experiences heightened their appreciation of the differences between formal schooling and home education. Zara did admit that there were occasions when learning at home could be a bit boring but that was not a strong enough incentive to wish to go back to school.

Zara: ... you get bored a lot, cause once you finish your work you've got nothing else to do except for the rest of the day. ... You get a bit lonely if you don't see your friends all the time. ... That's about the only dislikes that I didn't like about it.

Sam's response to the question asking what he disliked about home schooling was short.

Interviewer: Is there anything you don't like about home-schooling?

Sam: Um ah, not much (and finally) ... NO!

Robert, on the other hand, thought there were some significant drawbacks to his home schooling experience. He liked to have contact with teachers, especially those who put knowledge into contexts which made sense to him. The ability to discuss work with both teachers and students was also a feature he missed while learning at home. Whether his particular experience of home schooling while travelling restricted social contact or if it would have been an issue in a fixed location with known associates is unknown. The curriculum he used may have contributed to the feelings he had about rote learning and contextualized knowledge in contrast to Sam, who found that learning at home was ideal for learning in context.

Robert: [I] started to get bored of it.

Interviewer: Why?

Robert: Oh, ... I think it was because I ... couldn't discuss things and it wasn't creative enough. ... It was just a lot of facts, like the nuts and bolts of it and that was about it. ... If there was a period in history, you couldn't really put it into context, you couldn't say, you couldn't express how, where it fits in and everything. It was more about ... the important dates, why that event happened and that's it. And then you had the big test at the end, of kind of the little dots. ... I found that it didn't carry on ... in things like history, and there wasn't really a big link. It was just ... all kind of discrete and cut up into little sections.

Robert was also apprehensive that his level of skill would prove inadequate on return to school. He felt that the curriculum he had been using

emphasised grammar rules and not creativity. He was relieved to discover that his home schooling experience had helped him to achieve well at school.

Robert: There ... isn't ... constant kind of contact with the teacher. You can't just stick you hand up in the air and ask to have a concept explained ... and also there isn't ... facilities to discuss things with other students. So you can't just, you know, say 'Hey you, what do you think of this?' or 'Do you understand it?'

Social contact with peers was also mentioned as a concern with home education for Robert. He spent the year travelling in Europe and without the original support group with whom he had started home education. This appeared to have coloured his social experiences with home education.

Interviewer: Anything else?

Robert: ... about restricting your social contact. (Long pause).

### **Negative comments about school**

The three students were asked to describe the negative aspects of school.

Apart from 'absolutely hating' school, Zara was upset with how she felt she was perceived by the teachers. She did not like being treated as 'other' just because she was slow.

Zara: ...I was ... a bit slow, ... my teachers, ... they were like, 'You've got to do this NOW. And if you don't do it now you've got to stay in, at lunch time and catch up'. Didn't like that because ... I was a bit slower.... I like not being ... one of the first people to ... have questions asked, 'cause I'm not like in a room of 30 other people wanting to know the answer or something. (At another point) I didn't like being ignored by some of the teachers. ... I felt like (Pause) I wasn't really important in the classroom. I got teased a lot, yeah.

Zara felt that some of her slowness was the result of teachers ignoring her requests for help and she interpreted this to mean that she was not important to them. Her social experiences at school were the highlight of the day on those occasions when she wasn't trapped by institutional practices of 'othering' which kept her in at lunch time for her slowness. Zara saw this 'othering' process as one which left her open to teasing by some students.

Zara's second entry into formal schooling did cause her some concern. She felt unnerved by teachers yelling for class attention and upset when the board was wiped clean and she had not finished taking down the notes. Not being able to complete work in a given time slot also bothered her. But she had developed enough self-confidence in her own abilities to not allow these

factors to overwhelm her and she quickly established her own place back in school.

Zara: Teachers yell a lot. They like getting your attention, but, you just feel scared of them instead. ... they wipe the things off the board too quickly and you can't copy them down as fast as they'd like you to. (Pause) ... The classes are too short ... and the designated time isn't long enough for you to do it.

Sam was adamant that 'everything' about school was intolerable. For him, this had started with the bitter realisation that his thirst for knowledge and learning were turned into apparent insult by being taught simple things he had already mastered and from there things only became worse.

Sam: Oh, ... well, when I first went there and, and into grade prep. The work was a bit too easy. 'Cause I thought it would be ... really interesting work and it, instead it was stuff I already knew. Like how to count to ten [spoken with scorn]. ... And that, I can do my twenty-four times tables

One of the more telling comments of this period came in a discussion about friends. Here are three extracts from the interview with Sam.

Interviewer: So you can't think of anything you liked about school? ...

Sam: No, not much

Interviewer: O.K. and what about friends? ...

Sam: Friends! (tightly blowing air through his partially closed mouth)

Brother: Friends? Friends at school?

Sam: I thought I'd already talked about this.

Brother: Friends at school?! Ahhh. ...

Sam: And when I was at school and even in when they were bullying me ... I used to have imaginary friends.

Sam: I have more friends (now at home) than I had (with emotion – referring to school)

Mum: (very quietly comforting in background). He was 'othered' by the institutional incapacity to allow him the freedom to learn according to his ability without feeling that he was discriminated against and treated differently. This encouraged other students to treat him as different and only added to his woes.

Sam: Apparently ... I was having trouble at school because I was more intelligent than anyone else, than everybody else.

Mum: You were not more intelligent than EVERYBODY else but you were, you know, more intelligent ... than the work that was being presented to you.

One of the contributing factors to his struggle to fit into the school system was created in part by the school's attempt to accommodate his mathematical abilities by sending him to classes that were several grades above his age level. Skipping grades separated him from people that he

knew, and he felt that other children targeted him with teasing because of this.

Sam: Well ... I skipped Grade 1, after the end of Grade Prep. ... And ... then I went to Grade 2 ... and then there were people started bullying me. ... if I did get to make friends, in the next year I'd be in the next grade and (fighting tears).

Mum: Hmm, and you'd be separated from anybody you'd ...

Sam: YES! So what was the use of making them in the first place. Ohh, hh

When asked why he thought the other children bullied him he thought it was because he had skipped a grade and they had not.

Sam: Oh I don't know. I think it was because I ... well, because I got to skip a grade and they didn't.

Other school attempts to assist him in with his learning quandary were also unsuccessful. At one stage, the school principal held special maths classes for a few students in his office.

Sam: ... But it wasn't very interesting. It wasn't, you know, it was just the same old stuff except harder.

Robert was basically happy with school but some aspects were less pleasant, especially after he had experienced a different way of learning. There were distractions which wasted time. One of the worst features occurred when he was held to the slower pace of a class because some students did not quickly understand the topic. It was equally embarrassing when he felt that he was holding up the class when he did not understand the topic.

Robert: Sometimes there was too much distractions. ... You're restricted to the pace of the class so if they don't understand it but you do, you're just ... meditating for ages while the rest of the class just catches up. Also vice a versa ... I think that's what I see as the major dislikes of ... schooling.

When asked for his definition of education, he classed formal education and home schooling as follows.

Robert: ... to impart learning or understanding in the most boring way possible.

For Robert 'education' was different from 'learning'. He was keen to learn but felt that both formal schooling and the prepared curriculum he had used while being home educated had interfered with the learning experiences he keenly desired.

Like Sam, he was curious about his world and keen to discover new knowledge. He felt that school wasted a lot of time and allowed too many distractions. He would have preferred to go to school early, have no breaks and return home where he could pursue his own learning. Like Zara, he too did not appreciate feeling 'othered' when he was the only person in the class not to understand a topic. A second area of concern for both Zara and Robert developed when they were planning to return to school. They were both nervous that they would be behind the rest of the students. In both cases this proved to be an unfounded concern but they did note it as an issue when returning to formal education.

The students were also asked if there were things they were not expecting at school. Robert and Sam did not discuss this; however Zara did offer some comments. She found the class sizes in high school to be larger than she had anticipated and that in Year 8, the groups of friends were small and stayed intact. She felt much happier in Year 9 when she was able to meet and mix with many different groups of students.

### **The process of change**

The process of change for each student and for each transition was different. The change for Zara from school to home occurred over a two week mid-year school holiday. Classes at home started when formal school started back. She was fully expecting this change to only last until the beginning of the following year and seemed to adjust easily into the work. Returning to school was also an easy adjustment. She felt settled into the school program after three days. Zara's greatest concern was not whether she would be able to fit in with the other students. Her apprehensiveness was based on her concern about the academic standard of her peers and she was greatly relieved to discover that she was at a similar level. Her settling in time was very short.

Interviewer: How long ... would it have taken you?

Zara: May be two or three days.

The process of change for Sam was something he welcomed but it took time. His mother allowed him to run free of any constraints for at least three months. In that time he began to unwind from the tensions that had built up and it took at least that long for the family to sense that relationships within the home were healing. Sam had just started writing his own books before he left school but he took a break before he felt he could start writing again.

Sam: The change was easy. I wanted to do it earlier than we actually did. (Later) ...when we were just making the change over ... I think that was the longest space between me finishing a book.

The process of change for Robert occurred on both occasions over year end school holidays. The change from formal schooling to home schooling was associated with the excitement of trying something new and different but with which he had some knowledge through home schooling acquaintances. Returning to school in a new State caused Robert some apprehension. He, like Zara, felt apprehensive about whether or not he had been able to stay at the same academic level as his peers.

Robert: I remember I wasn't sure if I'd be up to scratch. I was ... quite afraid that I might have fallen behind because ... I wasn't doing it the way normal school did it. ... So I was a bit apprehensive that ... when I come back I wouldn't be able to ... do normal schooling.

He found the new school daunting and disliked the school. When asked if he felt that he had gone backwards academically with home education he gave a very definite answer.

Robert: Ah, no. They made me ... go ahead from what I could judge. ... I could ... understand and remember concepts that ... I remember being able to kind of learn them.

Essay writing skills were an area in which Robert felt vulnerable. He did not feel that the curriculum he used while home schooling emphasised this skill sufficiently and this caused him concern when preparing to re-enter formal schooling.

Robert: I was worried about [essays], but I found that it wasn't any problem. ... much to my surprise, I don't know if it was 'cause the school had a lower standard than I was expecting, or ah, maybe I really hadn't slipped behind.

Re-entry into formal schooling for both Zara and Robert was enhanced rather than impeded by their home education experiences.

### **Final comments to professionals**

The final question asked students if they had any comments they would like to pass on to the community, particularly to professionals.

Zara's immediate response was that home schooling was fun because children who were home schooled could meet a wide variety of people. Her mother had conscientiously set up a 75 family strong home schooling network and was involved consistently in children's activities at her church. Zara also felt that she could understand the things she studied more thoroughly. She also felt that she had developed a better understanding of people through her home education experiences as she felt her parents did a more thorough job of explaining social situations than 'school'.



Zara: It's fun! When ... you can meet lots of people you ... have a better understanding ... of just normal people, like how they act and stuff. ... I didn't learn that from school, I learnt that from home. That's things that parents can teach you.

Sam made no specific comment but Robert's biggest concern related to his need to know that home schooling would not disadvantage him academically when he returned to formal education. He thought some assurance about his levels would have alleviated unnecessary concern.

Robert: I think ... it's a good thing that there's discussion about [home schooling] because I do see the merits of ...home schooling ... some people who do home schooling do ... worry about how they will mark up against people doing formal schooling or ... Maybe ... students could be assured that there ... isn't such a huge gap between the two ... that their school systems [are] pretty comparable.

## **Home education learning styles**

The three students illustrated three basic types of learning approaches used by home educators. Thomas<sup>9</sup> (1998) described these family school types as (1) the school model, (2) Less formal or partial school models, and (3) informal or natural learning. Families who used a school model to set up their children's learning often had a basic timetable, set subjects and often use prepared curriculum from outside sources as was the case for Robert. He felt he had some autonomy over his learning as he set his own timetable and was also able to choose from a wide range of prepared electives. His electives – collectivism, business maths, history and entomology were highlights of his home schooling experience. Barratt Peacock (1997) noted in his study that all home schooling families moved from more formal approaches to informal ones. The students who used the less formal approach had set subject areas and work books for basic subjects such as maths and literacy but students were able to select times for working and develop other topics of interest to study, and this was illustrated by Zara's home schooling experience. In the third group of families, children were given autonomy over their own learning, which has often been referred to as 'natural learning', and was demonstrated in Sam's approach to learning.

Barratt-Peacock (1997) and Thomas (1998) discovered that conversational learning was central in all home schooling families. This suggests that the learning offered in home schooling families demonstrates strong links to Rogoff's (2003) theory that the most effective learning takes place when students are apprenticed into learning – where they co-create the learning in their communities. Two of these students noted that family support and interest were very important to them.

## Findings

When the positive and negative comments of home education were examined together, the positive features as experienced by these three students were more important than the negative aspects. There was discrepancy between Zara's and Sam's experiences as compared to those of Robert. Robert was concerned about a lack of immediate help whereas Zara and Sam appreciated the prompt help they received at home. The variation in curriculum used would appear to account for most of this discrepancy. Zara and Robert thought there were quiet moments in home education but the overall impact of this solitude did not appear to have long term negative effects.

An overview of student positive and negative comments about school revealed that Zara and Sam identified institutional practices in formal education as factors contributing to their academic struggles and damaged self-awareness and social experiences. The practice of placing students with varied ability together with the expectation that all students learn at the same pace, with the same motivation and interest, was identified as a key contributor responsible for alienating and inhibiting the development of these two students. Individual professional behaviour of teachers was also seen as a significant contributor to the success or otherwise of students' ability to develop happily in formal education. Positive comments about school were more frequent in the high school experience. One reason for this difference may be associated with the number of teachers a student deals with during a day in comparison to primary school situations. Even Robert, who thought home schooling could limit social contact, accepted that there were times when the social contacts in formal education could be detrimental to his overall academic success.

Student perceptions and experiences of acceptance by others and their own self-awareness and worth were developed through their home education experience (Clery, 1998). Zara and Sam made decisions about their learning indicating that their level of autonomy was high. This level of autonomy was not found in Krivanek's (1988) sample, however these findings do support the findings of Clery (1998) in this area. Formal education, on the other hand had provided strong experiences both positive and negative affecting their acceptance by others and their self-awareness (Krout, 2002). Adult contributions to these views were significant. Parent support was acknowledged by students as very significant to their positive home schooled experiences. The actions of professional teachers contributed to strong negative and positive experiences at school and these students indicated that 'otherness' was created more by the system of formal education than by the students' own personal incapacity to act or react in ways which formal education expected or could manage. Jaycox (2004) found that some children were hurt by their interactions with formal

institutions and that it was important to find educational alternatives for these children. These students all benefited from their time out of formal school. The children in this study were not withdrawn from school specifically for social reasons, although this was a factor in Sam's case. Neither did they return to school to improve social interaction as suggested by Krout (2002). Their re-entrance to school was successful because teachers were helpful, professional and considerate. The movement in and out of formal schools was made 'in the best interests of the child' as perceived by the parents and these interests varied widely for each individual child (Snyder 2005; Stoppler, 1998).

The process of change varied but was generally accomplished successfully in relatively short periods of time. When there had been emotional scarring, as in the case of Sam, the process of recovery took time. The two students who returned to formal schooling were most concerned about their academic ability to fit into formal classes. Neither had any problems academically but some method of determining their standard of achievement would have relieved unnecessary tension.

## **Discussion and implications**

Although this study is based on the experiences of only three students, their views give direction for further research. An investigation into institutional practices in early to mid primary school may find ways to lessen the impact of the aspects identified by these students as contributing to their alienation from formal schooling. Attributes of individual teacher responses to students in transition should also be examined to identify those which contribute to positive transition experiences for students. Student 'voice' should inform programs developed to improve transition between home education and formal schooling.

Home education should be included in mainstream discussion as an appropriate alternative for some students and further research conducted to discover situations where this approach could support programmes for such groups as at risk students. Common public concerns about the social development of students being home schooled were not supported by this research. This result was also supported in a number of overseas studies (Holder 2001; Medlin, 2000; Rothermel, 2002; Shyers, 1992; Taylor, 1986). This finding suggests that issues of socialisation are not restricted to school peers or currently accepted expectations of formal education. Further research on home education, particularly in the area of student learning, could also inform formal education of useful teaching procedures and learning styles and outcomes.

There are home educating families who do not exclude formal education as an option when planning the education of their children, even when

experiences have been negative. Positive experiences with education professionals could lead to beneficial relationships with these families and students. The development of an appropriate method of allowing students to assess their level of achievement before entry into school would alleviate unnecessary stress. Research is needed to explore appropriate transition times and processes. There is also sufficient reason to include investigation of co-occurring formal schooling and home education projects to appraise programs currently practiced by a growing number of formal institutions and home educating families.

The study of these students' perceptions of both home and formal education offer valuable insight into the impact of both family and institutional practice. Families contributed significantly to the healthy development of these students. Institutional practice harmed two of them in their most vulnerable years. An understanding of their views may have prevented these unhappy experiences. When two of the students returned to school, institutional practice was perceived as generally positive and helpful. This knowledge should also inform institutions in ways to strengthen and improve their practices so that children receive the greatest benefit (Rogoff, 2003; Hedegaard, 2005).

Parents considering home education or moving students into formal schooling might consider the different approaches home schooling families use and develop strategies to ease the apprehension of students who are about to make the transition into or out of formal education.

## Conclusion

Formal education and home schooling are both types of education available in Australia and they both serve an important avenue for the education of our children. Sometimes, when one system fails, the other system can act as a useful safety net and offer hope by allowing students the right to an enriching education and a pathway to a fulfilling and worthwhile adult life. Discourse between the two systems of education and discussion of a third option needs to be considered in the future for some students: that of collaboration between the two systems. Further research needs to be conducted into possible ways this collaboration could best achieve optimal results for children's learning and development of all children.

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