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Reasons for home educating in Australia: who and why?

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ABSTRACT

Home education is a legal educational option in Australia that continues to rise in popularity. This paper summarises the demographics and influences upon the decision to home educate of 385 home education families from Australia, representing 676 children who were home educated at the time of questionnaire completion. The research suggests female caregivers with higher levels of educational achievement than the general population predominantly coordinate home education. Some families eschewed mainstream education for philosophical reasons whilst others home educated due to perceived necessity. However, characteristic of both groups was the belief that the current education system was unable to provide a learning environment that would meet the educational and psychosocial needs of their children. This was not specific to a particular population of students but included those who were gifted children, or those who had a mental health or neurodevelopmental disorder such as autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, intellectual disability and/or impairment in vision and hearing. This has clear implications for policy and resourcing, including in-service teacher training. It also raises questions in relation to the provision of funding for families who home educate their children.

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Introduction

Prior to the industrial revolution, the provision of formal methods of education was limited. The rapid growth of industry transformed western education into legally mandated and institutionalised hierarchical systems, and home education ceased to be the dominant educational mode (Guterman & Neuman, 2017). The reliance on formal institutionalised learning continued until the late 1960s, when criticism of the public education system by educational reformers heralded the emergence of the contemporary home education movement (Knowles, Marlow, & Muchmore, 1992). Since this time, home education has continued to rise in popularity. Western countries, in which home education is a legal option, report a significant increase in home education figures with true numbers believed to be in excess of those reported. Estimates suggest there are more than two million home educated students in the United States, 80,000 in England, and 50,000 in Canada (Guterman & Neuman, 2017, 2018; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Neuman & Aviram, 2003).

The term home education, in an Australian context, traditionally describes parent-led home-based education and is a recognised educational option for school-age children in the various Education Acts of the States and Territories of Australia. Home education, sometimes called home schooling, is governed by the relevant Education Acts of each individual State or Territory, with all jurisdictions requiring the registration of home educated students (Drabsch, 2013). The states and territories of Australia differ as to their inclusion of “distance education” as a form of home education and registration requirements for distance education students subsequently differ. While distance education generally occurs in a child’s home, it is a centrally coordinated “school” which uses technology and employed teaching staff to deliver a standard curriculum. The School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) in Western Australia is an example of “distance education” in Australia. Due to reported registration compliance issues, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of children currently home educated in Australia. Based on a review of state and territory reports, Jackson (2019) states that 19,984 home educated students were officially registered. In recent years, the number of registered home educated students has increased in every state and territory of Australia. This included a 65% cumulative percentage increase in registered home educated students in New South Wales (NSW) between 2014 and 2018 (NSW ESA, 2019), and a 43% increase in Western Australia (WA) over the same period (DoE WA, 2018).

Far from a homogenous group, approaches to home education in Australia sit on a continuum from completely unstructured approaches, such as “unschooling,” through to formal instruction that mirrors a contemporary classroom approach (Drabsch, 2013). Guardians who register their child/ren as home educated have varying degrees of accountability to implement the Australian Curriculum (AC), depending on state or territory regulations. Home educators are generally required to provide evidence of a plan specifically developed to meet each child’s educational needs, and are responsible for monitoring educational progress in relation to this. To maintain registration some states require an annual home visit by a government official whilst others require an annual report or a combination of the two. In Victoria a random sample of 10% of home education families are reviewed each year for compliance against the state’s registration criteria.

Who is home educating?

In Australia, home education families are found in city, suburban and rural locations and home education tends to be organised by female carers (Jackson, 2009). Jackson and Allan (2010) summarised previous demographic research which indicated home education guardians held varying degrees of educational attainment, employment and income levels, and were generally single income households. Recent research relating to the demographic characteristics of Australian home educators is scant.

In the US, home education families can be found in city, suburban and rural locations. Jolly and Matthews (2018) note the difficulty of generalising across this community, who are a heterogeneous mix. However, the role of primary education provider is typically fulfilled by females while the gender balance of home educated children is relatively equal. Children age 5 to 14 years account for approximately 70% of home educated students with the remaining 30% comprised of students between the ages of 14 to 18 years. Redford, Battle, and Bielick (2017) reported that a large proportion of home educated students in the United States were white (83%).

Home educated students in the United States had guardians whose education level ranged from those who did not graduate high school (2%) through to those with a graduate degree (18%) (Redford et al., 2017). Kunzman and Gaither (2013) reported that half of home education guardians had a bachelor's degree or better, compared to 42% of the equivalent K–12 guardian population. Approximately 10% of home educated children were considered to be from poor households, with incomes below the prescribed poverty threshold (Redford et al., 2017), with the median family income close to the national average of US\$ 79K per annum (Homeschool Legal Defense Association [HSLDA], 2009). Parents in the United States have reported spending an average of \$600 per child/per annum to home educate a child (Ray, 2019).

Why do parents' home educate?

Reasons families choose to home educate have been noted to vary according to country. Analysis of data from the 2012 United States National Household Education Survey, (Kunzman, 2009; Redford et al., 2017) found that 91% of guardians chose home education at least in part due to concern regarding school environment. Other reasons provided by guardians included a desire to provide moral instruction (77%) and dissatisfaction with academic instruction (74%). In the 2016 iteration, school environment remained an integral concern among home education guardians; however the proportion of guardians who were motivated to provide moral instruction had contracted from 77% in 2012 to 67% (McQuiggan, Megra, & Grady, 2017).

More recently, the focus of home education research in the United States has returned to examining the inability of the school system to provide differentiated instruction and behavioural interventions for students with developmental differences. Jolly and Matthews (2018) note an emerging reason for home education in the United States is the inability of the school system to cater for children with “special education” needs, including specific learning disabilities and gifted students. Similarly, Simmons and Campbell (2019) highlight the increasing popularity of home education as an educational option chosen by parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

In a recent study, Neuman and Guterman (2019) interviewed 25 Israeli mothers who home educated their children and had at least one primary-school age child. They reported the reasons for home educating in four major themes: “educational situation”, where the parents viewed mainstream education as unable to meet their child's needs; “deliberate change”, where parental ideology was key in decision making; “opportunity”, where life circumstance led to home education; and “flow”, where no deliberate decision was made to home educate, but rather there was a continuation of learning at home that evolved into home education when it exceeded the time the child reached school age.

Morton (2012) examined the motivations for choosing to home educate in the United Kingdom, arguing that the home education guardians who she interviewed offered rationales for their decisions to home educate that were similar to those used by middle-class guardians to justify choosing a private school. These included “social milieu, acquisition of wider life skills and the transmission of values” (Morton, 2012, p. 47).

Australian researchers report that parents and guardians home educate their children for a range of reasons; including religious beliefs, concerns about teaching quality, bullying, health issues, and learning disorders (Varnham, 2008). The isolation of families by virtue of the

remoteness of location has, in the past, been observed as a defining reason for home education (Kunzman, 2009). Publically available data collected during the home education registration process by the NSW Education Standards Authority (2019), Australia's most populous state, suggests that in NSW, reasons for home educating children include "special learning needs" (24%), "Philosophical" (23%) and "Religion" (6%) (p. 13). With a growing number of families choosing home education as their preferred educational option (Jackson, 2019), it is important to conduct more research to better understand the nature of this expanding group within the contemporary Australian context (English, 2015; Jackson & Allan, 2010).

Methods

After receiving the appropriate ethical approval, The Australian Home Education Questionnaire (AHQ) was developed in 2018 as a mechanism to survey the Australian home education community. The questionnaire consisted of 35 questions, including multiple choice and short written response formats. Multiple choice response options, which were based on previous research, all included an "other" response option which allowed participants to submit a written response if none of the available options was appropriate to them or their child. After completing questions related to demographics, parents answered a set of questions which looped for each child being home educated. This allowed for responses to questions to reflect one child, rather than be generalised to the entire family. The final two questions related to the respondents' willingness to be interviewed.

Written responses were inductively coded by the authors using thematic analysis techniques, then compared and combined. For each question, all written comments were carefully read and categorised into common themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The number and percentage of comments which fell into each of the identified themes was calculated, thereby combining thematic and content analyses. For any given question, a comment could fall into more than one theme.

Questionnaire participants were recruited through state and territory home education bodies and home education social media groups. Home education groups were not targeted if they represented a narrow sub-group of home educators, such as "Home Educating Dyslexic Children". Participants were required to be currently home educating children, so as to avoid responses that may not represent the current home education community. The questionnaire was made available to participants online for one month.

This paper reports on the data from the AHQ to answer the research questions;

- (1) Who are our home education community in Australia?
- (2) Why do people choose to home educate their children in Australia?

Sample

Three hundred and eighty five Australian home educators who were currently home educating 676 children responded to the AHQ. Table 1 summarises the demographic information of the sample. The majority of the sample were women and the largest percentage of participants (32%) came from Western Australia, followed by New South

Table 1. Demographics of participants.

Gender	Frequency (N)	% of Sample	Age	Frequency (N)	% of Sample	Educational Attainment	Frequency (N)	% of Sample	State	Frequency (N)	% of Sample
Female	377	97.9	21–25	1	.3	Primary school	2	.5	ACT	3	.8
Male	5	0.01	26–30	18	4.7	High school	50	13.0	NSW	95	24.7
Fluid	1		31–35	71	18.4	Certificate I–IV	74	19.2	NT	3	.8
Missing	2		36–40	92	23.9	Diploma	52	13.5	QLD	67	17.4
			41–45	106	27.5	Degree	125	32.5	SA	9	2.3
			45–50	69	17.9	Postgrad Dip	39	10.1	TAS	6	1.6
			51–55	18	4.7	Master	33	8.6	VIC	78	20.3
			56–60	7	1.8	Doctorate	10	2.6	WA	124	32.2
			61–65	1	.3						
			66–70	2	.5						

Wales (24.7%) and Victoria (20.3%). More than half of the participants (53.8%) had achieved a degree level qualification or higher. The age of participants ranged from class interval 20–25 through class interval 66–70, with 87.7% of participants aged between 31 and 50 years.

Results

Who are our home education community in Australia?

The majority of participants (95.1%) were actively home educating three children or fewer, with just under half (44.7%) home educating one child. Figures relating to the number of children being home educated are shown in Table 2. When asked how many children they had home educated in total (currently and previously), the majority of respondents indicated 1 or 2 children (69.3%). A single respondent indicated she had home educated 13 of her children, the youngest three of whom she was currently home educating.

The participants provided data in relation to 676 children, with relatively equal numbers of males and females represented. Table 3 summarises the gender, age and birth position of the children. A notable sharp decline in the class interval 15–17 years of age is evident; with other age ranges showing relatively equal numbers of school age children being home educated by this sample of respondents.

Table 2. Number of children currently home educated.

Number of Children	Frequency (N)	% of Sample
1	172	44.7
2	135	35.1
3	59	15.3
4	11	2.9
5	4	1.0
6	2	.5
7	2	.5
Total	385	100.0

Table 3. Demographics of the children.

Gender	Frequency (N)	% of Sample	Age (yrs)	Frequency (N)	% of Sample	Birth Position	Frequency (N)	% of Sample
Male	352	51.9	3–5	85	12.6	1	276	40.8
Female	318	47.0	6–8	182	26.9	2	208	30.8
Other	1	<1	9–11	195	28.8	3	123	18.2
Non-binary	1	<1	12–14	153	22.6	4	43	6.4
DNR	4	<1	15–17	54	8.0	5	13	1.9
			18–20	2	<1	6	6	<1
			Over 21	3	<1	7	3	<1
						11	1	<1
						12	1	<1
						13	1	<1
						Adopted	1	<1

Most of the children who were part of this study had been educated at home for three or fewer years (60.8%). The longest any child had been home educated was 11–13 years.

Financial cost

Ninety-five per cent of participants gave an estimate of the amount of money it cost to home educate (resources, attendance at classes, excursions etc.) each child for whom they responded. The majority of students (58.9%) were educated at home for less than \$3000 per annum, with 78.9% being educated for \$5000 per annum or less. No funding was received to assist in home educating 84.3% of the children. Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) payment, a federal government payment for students who meet specific geographical or medical criteria (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2019), was received for 12.4 % of the children, while 2.8% of children attracted some other form of funding.

In addition to the direct outgoing costs associated with home education, an additional *loss* of income was noted by 64.7% of respondents. Of those who indicated a loss of income, the most frequent category of income loss (28.9%) was “more than \$50,000 pa” (net). A further 26.3% of respondents’ indicated a loss in income between \$20,000 and \$30,000. [Table 4](#) summaries the loss of income recorded for these families.

Table 4. Estimated loss of income due to home educating.

Estimated loss of income	Frequency (N)	% of Sample
0–\$5,000	7	2.8
\$5–10,000	8	3.2
\$10–15,000	12	4.8
\$15–20,000	21	8.4
\$20–25,000	36	14.5
\$25–30,000	29	11.6
\$30–35,000	21	8.4
\$35–40,000	10	4.0
\$40–45,000	7	2.8
\$45–50,000	24	9.6
More than \$50,000pa	72	28.9
Did not respond	2	<1

Table 5. Frequency of registration.

Is this child registered as home educated with the relevant education authority?	Frequency (N)	% of Sample
Yes	539	79.7
No	54	8.0
In the process of registering	30	4.4
Prefer not to say	6	< 1
We are not required to register	44	6.5
Did not respond	3	< 1

Compliance

Almost 80% of children were officially registered as home educated. In addition, a further 6.5% were not required to be registered, primarily because the child had not reached the age of compulsory schooling in their state or territory. Registration compliance is summarised in [Table 5](#).

Why do people choose to home educate their children in Australia?

The question as to why Australian families chose to home school is presented with reference to three samples, the total sample (N = 676 children) and two subsamples; those who never intended to enrol in a mainstream school the child to whom their responses referred (N = 285), and those that decided to home educate the child after initially engaging in mainstream schooling (N = 391). The influences on guardians' decisions to home educate are summarised under four resultant themes: social and emotional well-being, developmental difference, curriculum and standards and life style choices. The educational supports offered in mainstream education to the subsample of students who initially enrolled in mainstream education but were subsequently withdrawn, are further explored.

Social and emotional wellbeing

This theme included responses that indicated choosing to home educate a child because the mainstream educational environment could not meet their specific social or emotional needs, and included children with diagnosed mental health conditions. For the total population, 188 mental health conditions were reported for 154 children, meaning 22% of students had at least one diagnosed mental health condition that directly influenced their guardian's decision to home educate. A diagnosed mental health condition was reported as influential in the decision to home educate for 8% of students who had never entered mainstream education and 34% of students who had previously been in the mainstream education system. These are summarised in [Table 6](#). Guardians who had previously accessed mainstream education for a child reported that 56.8% of children exhibited emotional distress related to school attendance, with 30.7% of guardians specifically citing the bullying of a child. Six per cent of guardians who never intended to enrol the child in a mainstream school cited reasons related to the inability of

Table 6. Reported diagnosed mental health conditions.

Mental Health Condition (MHC)	Frequency (N)	% of MHC	% of Sample (N = 676)
Anxiety: General Anxiety Disorder	144	77%	21%
Depression	24	13%	4%
Anxiety: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	7	4%	1%
Anxiety: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder	5	3%	<1%
Selective Mute	2	1%	<1%
Anxiety: Agoraphobia	1	<1%	<1%
Borderline Personality Disorder	1	<1%	<1%
Conduct Disorder	1	<1%	<1%
Anorexia	1	<1%	<1%
Gender Dysphoria	1	<1%	<1%
Reactive Attachment Disorder	1	<1%	<1%

mainstream schooling to meet a child's social and/or emotional needs as a contributing factor to their commitment to home educate.

Developmental difference

The term developmental difference is used here to encompass conditions which place students out of step with their peers and require specific educational accommodations and/or interventions. Table 7 summarises the developmental differences reported as influencing guardians' decisions to home educate. It should be noted that children may have had more than one developmental difference. In total, 33% of students had at least one developmental difference in the prominent categories: specific learning disorder, specific motor disorder, gifted, autism spectrum disorder or attention deficit disorder, which influenced their guardian's decision to home educate them. This included 42% of previously mainstream schooled students and 24% of students who never attended a mainstream school. With 57 cases, representing 8.4% of the total sample of children, the most prevalent specific learning disorder reported by participants was dyslexia.

Guardians reported that, for 40% of children, the decision to home educate was influenced by a perceived limited understanding by teachers in relation to accommodating the child's specific educational need/s and/or the lack of available provisions to support and accommodate the child's specific educational or care need/s in the mainstream education system.

Curriculum and standards

One hundred and ninety three participants (28.5%) reported a mismatch between their expectations and the standard of education offered by the mainstream schooling system, with 38.4% of guardians of children previously in mainstream education reporting that the child was underachieving in relation to their ability in mainstream education, and 6.9% indicating they were specifically concerned that the child would not achieve secondary graduation. Concerns regarding standards and/or achievement were particularly prevalent among guardians of gifted children, where the above year level needs of the children were not accommodated in the mainstream system.

Table 7. Developmental differences requiring accommodations.

Developmental Difference (DD)	Frequency (N)	% of DD	% of Sample (N = 676)	% of Subsample 1*(N = 285)	% of Subsample 2 (N = 391)
Autism Spectrum Disorder	94	23	14	10	17
Specific Learning Disorders	89	21	13	10	16
Gifted	81	20	12	11	13
Attention Deficit Disorders	64	15	9	4	13
Specific Motor Disorders	47	11	7	3	9
Auditory Processing Disorder	5	1	<1%		
Sensory Processing Disorder	4	<1%	<1%		
Vision Impairment	4	<1%	<1%		
Epilepsy	3	<1%	<1%		
Oppositional Defiance Disorder	2	<1%	<1%		
Speech Delay	2	<1%	<1%		
Transgender	2	<1%	<1%		
Other	17	4%	2.5%		

*Note: Subsample 1, students who were never enrolled in mainstream education. Subsample 2, students who were previously enrolled in mainstream education. #Figures have been rounded.

The guardians of the sub-sample of children who never participated in mainstream schooling offered further explanation as to the reason/s for not considering mainstream education as an option. In addition to the themes noted in the larger sample, 15.4% of these parents cited issues directly related to the curriculum or how it was taught as influential in their decision not to access mainstream education for the child.

Life circumstances

This theme encompassed children who were travelling; those for whom an appropriate school could not be accessed due to distance, financial constraints or education department school catchment boundaries; and reasons related to religion or lifestyle. A total of 133 participants (19.7%) reported that their life circumstances influenced their decision to home educate, with the largest influence being religion; representing 41.3% of responses in the life circumstances theme and 7.8% of the total sample. Also relevant to this category are the approximately 25% of all participants who indicated that once they were home educating one child, it positively influenced their decision to home educate subsequent children. The inference being that home education is a life circumstance in itself which exists prior to decisions being made about subsequent children.

Educational support

To further understand the decisions of guardians who had accessed mainstream education prior to home educating, this sub-sample were asked about the supports which were offered by mainstream education and those they independently accessed beyond the classroom.

In relation to the 391 children who had participated in mainstream schooling prior to being educated at home, 48.7% of children had attended more than one school, and most of those (48.1%) had attended school solely in the public school sector (the largest educational provider in Australia). [Table 8](#) summarises which providers were accessed by the respondents for their child/ren. The main education providers in Australia are Government (public), Catholic Education and Association of Independent Schools (AIS). Of the 48 children whose guardians' responses were categorised as "Other", the majority (n = 22) of their previous education sources were independent Christian schools.

Table 8. Education providers accessed by respondents prior to home educating.

Provider	Frequency (N)	% of Subsample (N = 391)
Public schools	188	48.1
Public and Catholic	21	5.4
Public and AIS	37	9.5
Public, Catholic and AIS	1	.3
Catholic	30	7.7
Catholic and AIS	2	.5
AIS	60	15.3
Other	48	12.3
Total	387	99.0
Missing	4	1.0
	391	100.0

Table 9. Summary of school based accommodations and services.

Specialist Services/Accommodation Through Education System	Frequency (N)	% of Services (%)	% of Sample (N = 197)
Individual Education Plan	106	25.4	53.8
Special Needs Education Assistant	59	14.1	29.9
School Psychologist Services	51	12.2	25.8
Extension Pull Out Programme	50	11.9	25.4
Specialist Group Numeracy or Literacy Remediation	46	11.0	23.4
Access to a Chaplain	37	8.8	18.8
Health Care Plan	26	6.2	13.2
Individual Behaviour Plan	22	5.3	11.2
Full-time Gifted Education Programme	9	2.2	4.6
Other	12	2.9	6

Of the 391 children who had participated in mainstream schooling prior to being educated at home, 50.4% had received specialist services or accommodations through the school system. Details of the 418 services or accommodations received by those children are shown in Table 9. The service or accommodation most commonly provided was an individual education plan (53.8%), followed in frequency by special needs education assistants (29.9%), school psychologist services (25.8%), extension pull out programmes (25.4%) and specialist group numeracy or literacy remediation (23.4%).

Guardians had privately engaged professional services for 231 (59%) children. Details of those 678 services across ten professional categories are shown in Table 10. The most commonly provided professional service was with a psychologist (65.4%), followed in frequency by paediatricians (54.5%), occupational therapists (42.9%) and speech therapists (42.4%).

Of those children who had received a privately engaged professional service prior to being home educated, guardians of 178 (77.7%) of the children had supplied the mainstream school and/or teacher with a copy of the recommendations made by the child's specialist/s "Always" or "Most of the time". For the children whose guardians had conveyed specialists' recommendations to the school "Always" or "Most of the time", the recommendations in relation to 70.7% of the children were followed in the school environment *less than* 50% of the time. Respondents for these children were asked why they felt the recommendations of specialists were not followed in the school environment. Table 11 summarises the resultant themes. Some participants referred to more than one theme. Lack of pedagogical knowledge/teaching experience and an open disregard or disbelief of the diagnosis and recommendations provided were the most commonly reported beliefs among the guardians of these children. Examples for these two

Table 10. Privately engaged professional services.

Professional Service Privately Engaged	Frequency (N)	% of Services	% of Sample (N = 231)
Psychologist	151	22.3	65.4
Pediatrician	126	18.6	54.5
Occupational Therapist	99	14.6	42.9
Speech Therapist	98	14.5	42.4
Audiologist or ENT Specialist	59	8.7	25.5
Physiotherapist	37	5.5	16.0
Chiropractor	32	4.7	13.9
Psychiatrist	23	3.4	10.0
Rheumatologist	11	1.6	4.8
Other	42	6.2	18.2

Table 11. Guardian's perceptions: why recommendations were not followed.

Theme	Frequency (N)	% of Sample (N = 174)
Lack of pedagogical knowledge or experience.	33	18.9%
Did not believe the diagnosis or recommendations.	33	18.9%
Lack of care or effort.	23	13.2%
School facilities, resources or structures.	22	12.6%
Time	21	12%
Class size	10	5.7%
Lack of funding	8	4.6%
Poor behaviour management skills	6	3.5%
Invisibility/Highly compliant child	6	3.5%
Poor communication	6	3.5%
School leadership	6	3.5%

categories respectively included; "The teacher/school administration had limited knowledge of the condition and the implications for learning" (P85), and "The teacher believed that the diagnosis and recommendations were wrong and told me so" (P10).

Many guardians were eloquent about the extent of the distress children had experienced in mainstream school and what they (guardians) had done to try to make school work. For example:

Due to my son's uncontrolled Epilepsy, learning difficulties, Cerebral Palsy, Kidney malformations, he needs full supervision and full support with his learning. I tried four different schools, two being Education Support Centres and this still was not suitable. My son is coping much better being homeschooled and is so much happier now. I will never return him to formal mainstream schooling again! (P16)

My son has inferential comprehension and social skill delays due to his Autism. He has a slower processing speed (oddly not shown in his SB5 results) and he has high anxiety. Three public schools all fell back to policy rather than provide fairly low level supports, and I realised if my son was to grow and develop we'd need to advocate and do it ourselves. Homeschooling is not a permanent plan for us, rather a stop gap while we address educational needs. (P34)

The school system does not allow for different learning needs only the mainstream. Teachers were not sufficiently trained to know how to teach a child with a combination of learning disorders. I am an educator and tried relentlessly to provide information to help school staff, but quite frankly it was too hard! (P69)

In year 1 my child could read, write and comprehend at approx. a high school level. In his year 3 NAPLAN he scored the highest score possible. He was bored witless and the school couldn't cope, let alone comprehend his needs. A quiet, polite, perfect student bored to death. An individual learning plan was a joke, just more work at the same level. Finally when the funding for his yr. 3 maths extension class was given to the struggling students he was given no challenge or joy to learn, just hurry up and wait for everyone else. (P235)

Discussion

Reflective of previous and international research, home education families in Australia can be found in city, urban and rural environments and female guardians aged 31–50 years are predominantly in charge of coordinating the home education programme.

Home education guardians were highly educated, with over half of the participants (53.8%) achieving a degree level qualification or higher, compared to 31.4% of the general population in Australia of an equivalent age range (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018) with less than 1% not achieving high school graduation. Further, 21.3% of guardians had a post graduate qualification. This was similar to data from the United States which suggested that 50% of home education parents have a degree qualification or higher (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013), with 18% having post graduate qualifications (Redford et al., 2017).

There were approximately equal numbers of males and females being home educated, with the majority having been educated at home for less than three years. The sample suggests that relatively equal numbers of 6 to 8, 9 to 11 and 12 to 14 year olds are being home educated, with a sharp decline in the 15 to 17 years' category. This may be reflective of the age at which students can access courses which provide pathways to university through vocational training providers and can gain employment without a permit, in the Australian context. Additionally, students in the age range 16 to 18 years are often engaged in university preparation courses where subject matter becomes specific and more complex; for example Physics, Specialist Mathematics and English Literature. It is possible that children who wish to study these subjects do so through more formal educational environments.

Eighty four per cent of families received no financial support from the government or other agencies to home educate their children while the majority (58.9%) of students were educated at home at a cost of \$3000 or less per annum. Results indicated a higher average cost than the \$600 (\$865AUD) per child, per annum cited for United States home educated children (Ray, 2019), which may reflect a number of factors around local economies and is not a simple comparison. In addition to outgoing costs, 64.7% of Australian home education families reported a loss of income, with net loss exceeding \$20,000 in the majority of cases (79.8%). Based on 2018 estimates, it costs the Australian government approximately \$10,953 per annum to educate a primary school student and \$13,764 per annum to educate a secondary school student (excluding loadings for educational disadvantage) (Hanrahan, 2018). Given that home education is a legal option in Australia, and each child being home educated saves the Australian government in excess of \$10,000 per child, it seems socially inequitable to offer no financial support to families meeting the educational needs of their child/ren, particularly when they are forgoing work related income to fulfil the role.

Further to this, more than 33% of this sample of home educated children have a developmental difference that is known to require qualitatively different educational interventions; and 22% of the students had a diagnosed mental health condition, both of which have economic implications for whomever, school or guardian, provides for the education of those children. Students with a disability, which by definition includes persons with "a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction" (Australian Government, 1992), attending mainstream education in Australia are categorised as requiring supplementary, substantial or extensive support in the school environment and are funded accordingly. Under this scheme, a primary school age child with a disability will receive an additional loading, above the base funding rate, of 42%, 146% or 312% respectively, according to their category of need (Australian Government, 2019). In dollars, a primary age child with

supplementary support needs is funded at approximately \$16,000 per annum while a primary school age child with extensive support needs is funded at approximately \$47,000 per annum; while many parents who are home educating children with the same level of disability receive no education funding.

Multiple home education publications report issues with registration compliance in relation to home education in Australia (Harding, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Reilly, 2007). However, in this current sample, over 90% of families were either registered, in the process of registering or not required to register due to the age of the child. This is a much higher rate of registration than suggested in previous publications. The questionnaire was completely anonymous and parents were reminded of this prior to answering this question, leaving no obvious reason for people to supply false information. This suggests that reports of inaccurate estimates of the number of children being home educated in Australia as a result of poor registration compliance may not be true. This needs to be considered in relation to the sample, for example, it is difficult to remove a child from formal education and not register for home education, because the child is identified by the relevant state education authority. A large proportion of this sample had previously engaged in mainstream education. The large number of registered participants in this sample may also reflect the self-selecting nature of the sample, whereby registered home educators may have been more likely to self-select into the research than non-registered home educators.

Analyses of the influences on guardians' decisions to home educate each child they were currently home educating resulted in four emerging themes: social and emotional wellbeing, developmental difference, curriculum and standards and life style choices. The theme of social and emotional wellbeing included some concerns in relation to school environment which overlapped with research conducted in America (Redford et al., 2017) and Israel (Neuman & Guterman, 2019). This included "bullying" as a form of violence, previously reported by Varnham (2008), but excluded any concern from this Australian sample relating to the use of and/or access to drugs in the mainstream education system in Australia.

The prevalence of a mental health condition and the perception that this could not be accommodated in mainstream education influenced 22% of the research sample to home educate their children. For previously mainstream schooled children, the prevalence of a mental health condition was 34%, while for students who had never entered mainstream education the prevalence was 8%. The large difference between these two subsamples is an observation requiring further research. The most prevalent condition reported in the sample was anxiety and this is reflected in the broader Australian community (Goodsell et al., 2017). Given the growing prevalence of anxiety in the school aged population in Australia (Goodsell et al., 2017), there are implications for policy makers, schools and teachers in assisting students to understand and manage anxiety and in creating environments that do not cause nor exacerbate anxiety in our children. The need to ensure a safe and nurturing environment is further supported by the 56.8% of parents who had previously accessed the mainstream education system for a child, but decided to home educate due to the emotional distress their child exhibited when attending mainstream school/s.

Issues related to children's developmental differences, including physical disability, specific learning disorders, autism spectrum disorder, gifted children and children with attention disorders dominated the Australian sample as one of the most influential reasons

for parents choosing to home educate. Guardians reported that, for 40% of children in this sample, they felt that teachers and/or schools lacked the relevant professional knowledge or resources to accommodate the child's developmentally different needs.

Specific to the sub-sample who had accessed mainstream education prior to home educating; guardians reported that for more than 70% of children with a specific diagnosis, the recommendations of qualified professionals were implemented in the school environment less than 50% of the time. More alarming was that the equally most prevalent reason given by these guardians as to why they perceived this occurred was that teachers and/or administrators did not "believe" the diagnosis made by qualified professionals to be correct and subsequently did not act upon them. The term "perceived" is used out of consideration and respect for the teaching profession; in fact, many parents were told directly that diagnoses and/or educational accommodations prescribed by qualified professionals were wrong, and recounted conversations with teachers and school administrators as evidence.

The diversity of developmental differences that may present in any Australian classroom is reflected in this sample. It is therefore imperative that teachers, parents and health care providers work together to support students in a way that is respectful of what each stakeholder can bring to the collaborative effort. A 2016 federal inquiry into the education of children with a disability in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) recommended that the government "work with states, territories, experts, stakeholders, school systems, parents and students to establish a national strategy to improve the education of students with disability." The recommendations aligned with the issues raised by participants in this study, including access to reasonable educational adjustments and improved teacher and principal knowledge and skill through ongoing professional learning. They also recommended an interdisciplinary approach to meeting the needs of students with a disability which may also promote a more accepting attitude from teachers towards the diagnoses and recommendations prescribed by medical professionals which were so often cited as being met with disbelief by participants in this research.

Twenty eight per cent of parents reported a mismatch between their expectations and the standard of education offered by the mainstream schooling system, including teaching quality (the way the curriculum is taught) and the scope and structure (what is included and how it is arranged). This was far lower than the 74% of American home educators who expressed "dissatisfaction with academic instruction" (Redford et al., 2017). Responses that elaborated on the curriculum that is implemented in schools gave further insight into this concern, with respondents describing it as irrelevant, inflexible and offering a poor match between ability and age in its structure. Further to this, a preference for child-centred pedagogies can be detected across the emerging themes relating to this question. Overlap also exists between reflections on teaching quality and the aforementioned perception of guardians that teachers or schools could not meet the needs of their child due to a developmental difference.

The final theme of "life circumstance" represented 19.7% of guardians' responses. For 7.8% of the total sample (over 40% of this theme), guardians reported that "reasons related to the family's religion" were influential in the decision to home educate. This reason is not as prevalent as in results of research in the United States, where a "desire to provide religious instruction" reportedly influenced the decision to home educate for 51% of the home education community (McQuiggan et al., 2017). In the 2016 census, 70% of Australians

over the age of 18 reported that they had a religion (ABS, 2017), while in the same year, 76% of Americans reported having a religious affiliation (Cox & Jones, 2017). This degree of difference would not explain the large difference between Australia and the United States in the proportion of students being home educated for religious reasons. Further investigation into the specific religious affiliations of the home education community and the mainstream options open to those religions in each country may elicit greater understanding.

Limitations

This research is limited by the self-selecting sample and the self-reporting nature of the Questionnaire method. For example, the sample was a highly educated group, however, were guardians with higher levels of educational attainment more likely to self-select into the research? Furthermore, self-reported information is limited by the level of honesty and introspective ability of the respondent. In addition, the questionnaire required internet access which is known to be limited in very remote parts of Australia.

Conclusions

A growing number of Australian families are choosing home education as the preferred educational option for their children. For the 676 children in this sample, the primary influences on the decision to home educate were the child having a developmental difference requiring accommodations, dissatisfaction with the standard of education offered, including the curriculum, and concerns about social and emotional wellbeing, including students with a mental health condition. Guardians, predominantly female, are forgoing income with the majority receiving no financial support to offset the cost of educating their children at home. The dominant message is one of equity, where policies need to a) prioritise supporting teachers and schools through professional learning and resources to better meet the needs of the diverse student body, and b) provide support to guardians who choose home education by providing financial and physical resources, without an increase in regulatory requirements.

More broadly, there are implications evident in this research in relation to the necessity to collect data on the home education population in Australia and to provide support to students with disability in school and in home education. Considering the similarities and differences between this Australian sample and home education research conducted in the United States, particularly in relation to motivation, it is clear that extrapolations of United States home education research to the Australian context should be approached with caution, and more research within the Australian context is necessary to accurately inform policy. It is also evident that in failing to collect data from home educators in relation to the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) we are excluding a large sample of students from consideration and subsequently from the potential to inform policy. Until this is rectified these children will remain hidden in the education system.

Disclosure statement

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