# Flexi-schooling: a practical solution?

## Could home schooling be a practical solution to low teacher numbers, asks REBECCA ENGLISH.

**THERE** can be little doubt that the number of students interested in choosing teaching as a first option on their university entrance preferences is dropping. The number in Queensland, for example, is down 50 per cent since 2005 (DEEWR, 2011, 2012), with similar decreases being reported in other countries such as the UK (BERA-UCET, 2012). At the same time, however, the numbers of students in need of a school education, in Australia, as elsewhere, is increasing. Recent productivity commission data suggest that the numbers of additional school students will be around 900,000 between 2010 and 2022 (Productivity Commission, 2012). You don't have to be a pre-service maths teacher to see that there is a problem looming in educational provision in this country, as in others.

## Over-supply of students?

In the UK, this structural imbalance is being addressed with 'flexi-schooling', a system where students are taught part-time at nursery or school and part-time at home (cf Vasagar, 2011). While this is not an option for all, or likely even many parents, it is indicative of a shift that is occurring in the choices parents make about schooling. In the US, the UK, and even here in Australia, the number of students who are being home schooled is increasing (Townsend, 2012; Fedele, 2010). It has been suggested that home school numbers in the US are rising by between 15 and 20 per cent every year (Gathercole, 2009).

## Who chooses home schooling?

As the new school year loomed in January, the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) published an article on parents who were home schooling illegally (Townsend, 2012). In that article, the author argued that there were around 50,000 students who were not registered for school or home school (Townsend, 2012). Registration as a home school family is a legal requirement in all States and Territories in Australia. One high profile Queensland case was cited in which the defendant was fined $300, plus costs, for failing to register his 13-year-old daughter for school. However, while acknowledging that there are 942 parents who have registered to home school in Queensland, the defendant estimated that there were around 10,000 students who were illegally home schooled in Queensland alone.

> **Attracting students to teaching is one problem. An additional problem is what to do with all the parents who turn up at schools, wanting their children to be educated, when there are not enough teachers to teach, and there is not enough infrastructure to house them.**

If the numbers are correct, and there are 10,000 students who are not registered in either school or home school programs, this statistic prompts the question: why do parents choose to home school rather than enrol them in formal education?

A study by the Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council, of its 600 members, suggested that, for around half, it is philosophical reasons that prevent them from enrolling their children in school. This figure means that roughly half of the parents who home school have a philosophical objection to compulsory schooling. It is suggested that this philosophical objection goes beyond NAPLAN, the national curriculum, the hours of schooling or the quality of teachers.

The objection is apparently based on an opposition to the regulation of the school, and other institutions such as hospitals and police, over family life (Townsend, 2012). Thus, these people have an objection to the ways that schools manage, and control, their student populations.

# Reasons for home schooling

The study revealed that, for 17 per cent, the reason for home schooling was religious. These parents were not able to access, or were not satisfied with, a religious school. The remainder of the respondents suggested that they were unhappy with the local school (27 per cent) or that their child had special needs that could not be met in a local school (seven per cent). There was no breakdown of the figures available for what made the parents unhappy or what their children's special needs were.

In an article on essentialbaby.com.au (Fedele, 2010), the special needs of children whose parents had chosen home schooling were described. The special needs included children with ADHD and autism spectrum disorders. In an interview with one family who chose to home school, the mother described how she felt 'forced' to choose 'the path to home schooling' because her *'eldest son, Brydon, had to repeat kindergarten'* when he was *'diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome ... and was not socially and emotionally ready for school'* (Fedele, 2010, pp. 6-7). The essentialbaby.com.au study argued that, in Victoria at least, the number of registered home schooling families is on the rise. Citing the jump in figures of 859 families in 2008, to 1257 in 2009, the article suggested that, among the reasons for the increase in number, was a growing acceptance of home schooling as a viable, legal and attractive option in the community. However, the suggestion that home schooling is a blanket term for schooling that exists outside a formal educational setting belies the fact that there are many and varied ways to home school.

# Types of home schooling

One of the parents in the essentialbaby.com.au article was quoted as saying that, in spite of her qualification in teaching, her *'teacher training went out the window because the family opposed traditional methods'* (Fedele, 2010). Thus, the approach taken involved *'a little bit of structure ... but mostly it's child-led learning'*. However, not all families follow a child-led pedagogical approach and many home schoolers follow the stereotype of the family sitting around the kitchen table undertaking lessons with a blackboard and books. The approaches to home schooling are as divergent and various as the reasons families choose to home school.

# A school at home

At one end of the spectrum is the family that approaches home schooling as a school at home. There are many resources available to help families to structure their home school. Many Christian resources are available online or via subscription that can assist families. Similarly, many non-religious resources also exist. In addition, the syllabus documents that are followed in state and non-government schools are available online and thus, many families can institute their own work programs and activities based on those syllabi and support materials. In some ways, these are the types of home schooling families that are probably what people think of when they hear about home schooling.

For some families, the other extreme is chosen. These families are 'unschooling', 'deschooling' or raising 'free range kids'. John Holt proposed the 'unschooling' philosophy in the 1970s. He described unschooling in 1977 and defined it as teaching from home without a fixed curriculum. Holt (Holt & Farenga, 1981) stated that *'unschooling [is] allowing children as much freedom to learn in the world, as their parents can comfortably bear',* however, it does not mean that parents do not guide and discuss topics that interest their children. Nor does unschooling mean that children are left alone to do whatever they see fit.

Rather, the children lead with their parents, by discovering what they are interested in and pursuing that interest. Parents may encourage an interest by taking their child to an art gallery, sporting event, performance or science museum. For example, if the child saw a painting that they liked, they might explore the style of painting, the era in which the painting was created, and create a work in a similar style. In addition, time is kept free for unstructured play, thinking, gardening and other activities. At the heart of the philosophy is the belief that children can be trusted to learn at their own pace so that, for example, they may not be reading or writing until they are much older, they may learn things in a different order or way or they may not learn some things at all (Hunt, 2001).

# The middle path

Between these two extremes is the approach taken by the majority of home schooling families. These families might employ 'experts' to teach their children more formal lessons in subjects with which the parents are unfamiliar. Specific, vocationally required knowledge such as calculus, algebra, biology, functional grammar and physics are often given as examples of subjects and areas for which parents seek out an 'expert' (cf. Schildbach, 2009). In addition, in the middle and senior years, TAFE can be accessed to offer a range of study options that can be studied by correspondence courses. In the early, and early middle years, it is often more informal. To illustrate, one participant in

the essentialbaby.com.au article described the day as involving 'anything and everything ... from doing chores to reading and drawing, designing games on the computer, playing with leggo [sic], and completing puzzles ... a bounce on the trampoline, and PlayStation' (Fedele, 2010). While this sounds vastly different from the types of activities that children undertake in a traditional primary school setting, parents who home school argue that trying to compare home and traditional schooling is like trying to compare apples and oranges: 'you're comparing a system where you've got one teacher with 30 kids compared to one parent with two kids' (Fedele, 2010). In addition, it is noted that many children who are home schooled also attend traditional school for part of their education. For example, one of the participants in the essentialbaby.com.au story spoke of their child who had chosen to attend a local high school after home schooling for several years. In addition to attending this high school, this student had also attended an alternative school. It seems that home schooling families tend to move in and out of schools, so home schooling is often just one dimension of a family's educational choices.

## Supporting home schooling parents

How can schools better support parents who home school? If students are moving between home and traditional school, it is potentially useful that schools support home school families who may, in the future, become students. However, the reasons for moving between home and traditional school vary, as do the types of families that choose to home school. Thus, it seems that schools might be able to attract that group of home school families, which statistically are the largest group, who are philosophically against the idea of schools. If schools appear to be supportive and nurturing of the home school family, it may be that these families may drop many of their objections to schools.

Firstly, the sharing of curriculum resources with parents who choose to follow a traditional school at home route could be useful. By providing these resources, schools could also show parents who have made the choice to home school that they are supportive, willing to engage in a dialogue and are not nefarious institutions who wish to control their children.

Secondly, the school could use their specific resources to assist home school families. For example, the use of specialised hospitality kitchens, industrial work sheds and art studios could be opened up to home school families. Again, opening up of the resources would assist home school families to feel more comfortable within the space of a traditional school.

Thirdly, activities that allow socialisation between home and traditionally schooled students could be implemented. Many home school families report that questions about socialisation are dreaded but common among families who traditionally school (cf. Fedele, 2010; Schildbach, 2009). For some, socialisation comes from the sporting clubs and associations that their children join. For others, the socialisation is in the local community with neighbours. For yet others, the decision to home school comes from a desire to privilege their extra-curricular activities, such as dance or orchestra, and the socialisation comes from these activities. There could be a great deal of knowledge in the community that could be accessed by traditionally schooled students if the schools were more open to the knowledge and skills of home school students.

## No major competition

It is noted that home schooling will never compete, in the same sense as the public/private schools compete, with traditional schools. There are too many barriers for many parents to home schooling.

Firstly, there are the economic costs involved in managing children in the home. Home schooling involves one parent giving up full-time work or both parents combining part-time paid work, or work from home, with both parenting responsibilities and teaching/facilitating their children's learning.

Secondly, many parents do not feel confident in teaching their children, not to mention the onerous procedures that exist in most States around applying to home school. Thirdly, the social stigma still exists around home schooling and this would be a barrier to many parents, particularly where other, close family members did not approve. Finally, it is not on the radar for many parents, who would not consider it as an option. However, as the numbers indicate, there is a growing trend towards home schooling. It also seems that religious convictions might only be a part of the story, particularly if teacher numbers remain low and enrolling a child in a school becomes more problematic. Perhaps it is time that principals and education administrators considered the needs, interests and motivations of this small, but growing, minority.

*A full set of references for this article is available from the author.

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