Home Education in Australia

by Terry Harding
BA, DipEd, DipCDP, MEd, MACE
Manager, Schools Department, Christian Education Ministries;
home educator for 15 years with wife Diane;
former principal of the Australian Christian Academy



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In all Australian states and territories and across the Western world, especially the US, Europe, NZ and South Africa, increasing numbers of parents are choosing to educate their own children at home. The home education movement has flourished over the past 30 years as families have been increasingly able to access distance education, home schooling networks, high quality curriculum materials and a wide variety of information via the internet.

This paper describes the development of home education in Australia and answers some frequently asked questions about academic achievement, socialisation and tertiary entrance.

The colonial era

When the first Europeans came to live in New South Wales in 1788, 36 children were on board the 11 ships. Their need for education was first met by Isabella Rosson, a convict who established a "dame school" in her Sydney home that year.[2] Two similar dame schools were founded on Norfolk Island by Thomas McQueen and at Parramatta by Mary Johnson. Dame schools were usually conducted in the living rooms and kitchens of women who would teach convicts' children without charge and the children of military officers for a small fee.[3] Thus formal education in Australia began in family homes.

Rev Samuel Marsden arrived in the new colony with his wife Eliza and newborn daughter Ann in 1794. Marsden was assistant chaplain to Rev Richard Johnson, appointed on the recommendation of UK Christian MP William Wilberforce. Australia's first school was burnt down in 1798, so Eliza Marsden educated her children at home. She wrote: "and there not being one good school that I should have been very happy to have heard of her being safe with, my mother. She (Ann) is now 5 ½ years old, she reads a little and works very neat."[4] Rev Richard Johnson's children Milbah and Henry were also educated at home for some time. Eliza wrote: "Milbah and Henry are two fine children. Milbah you will see what progress she has made in her writing and it is a great pity she is not in England."[5]

By 1807 Governor Bligh had recorded that there were 1831 children in New South Wales[6] – prompting the development of a more structured, school-based approach to education. During the 19th century there was much competition between church and state schooling systems. However for the many children living in remote locations throughout the six Australian colonies, home education was a matter of necessity rather than parental choice.

Between 1872 and the 1880s, every Australian colony passed laws to establish state-controlled school systems where education was to be "compulsory, free and secular". The term "secular" did not mean devoid of religion as it is often used today. In all states except Victoria, it simply meant that state-controlled education would teach "common Christianity", rather than the special doctrines of a particular Christian denomination. The new laws established classroom-based schooling as the dominant education system. Home-based education became far less common.

The modern home education movement

Since the early 1900s, most Australian states have supported home-based education for families in remote locations through state-funded correspondence schools and schools of distance education.[7] However the modern home education movement is not only about remote families. It is about parental choice in education, regardless of location.

Since the late 1970s, increasing numbers of Australian students have been moving from state schools to independent schools and to home education. This is a result of parental concerns about a decline in literacy and numeracy standards, the social and physical well-being of their children and the failure of state school systems to reinforce Christian values. The home education movement has grown from small numbers of families often operating alone without support systems in the 1980s, to become a well-organised, networked community which now spans the nation.

The first formal home schooling support institution in Australia was the Australian Christian Academy. Commencing with six families in October 1982, it is now known as the Australian Christian College and remains the largest measurable non-government home education group in Australia. Over 4,000 students are enrolled in its three schools of distance education in Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia. Currently there are many government schools of distance education, nine non-government schools of distance education and several home school organisations operating across Australia.

Home educators have also developed local, regional and state-wide support networks in all states and territories. These support groups provide social interaction, educational activities, parent training, camps, legal services, conferences and access to various educational curriculums.

Reasons for home education

I surveyed Queensland home educating parents and found six major reasons for their decision.[8] Some parents gave more than one reason:

- **Religious faith** – these parents wish to pass on their faith to their children as part of their education, rather than exposing them to the growing anti-religious sentiment in many Australian schools.
- **Parenting** – home education provides a unique way for parents to create and maintain close bonds with their children.
- **Socialisation** – these parents want to promote positive socialisation and to reduce negative peer influence and bullying in their children's lives.
- **Academic achievement** – these parents seek to shape their children's academic success rather than risk the poor literacy and numeracy that sometimes results from some questionable modern education practices.
- **Practicality** – where suitable schools are unavailable or unattainable, or for travelling families.

- **Children's special education or health needs** – these are sometimes best met by home education.

Home education styles

Australian parents may choose one of three methods of home education:

- a structured program similar to that used in schools;
- a selection of books and courses from a variety of sources;
- a "natural learning" approach, with little formal structure.[9]

The common factor in each method is that parents are practising their chosen form of education with their own children in their own homes. There is a difference between home schooling and distance education. In home schooling, parents take total responsibility for their children's education with little or no structured outside help. In distance education, parents enrol their children in a government or non-government school of distance education. These provide, for a fee, a structured education program for the family to use, the assistance of school teachers and the resources of a school.

Home education and academic achievement

Significant research has demonstrated that home-educated students perform academically as well as or better than those in traditional schooling, and that motivated parents are effective educators.[10] Home-educated students did well in the following areas:

- reading, maths, language, science and social studies;[11]
- senior matriculation;[12]
- academic achievement and intelligence measures;[13]
- vocabulary, reading, language skills, work study skills and maths.[14]

One study found no significant difference in the critical thinking skills among first year university and college students between those who were home educated and those who were educated in schools.[15]

Another study found no significant difference in the intellectual development of home educated and traditionally schooled students.[16] It also found that home educated students moved into formal thought between the ages of 10 and 11, whereas the national average was between 15 and 20. In other words, home educated children have a mature approach to learning at an earlier age. They are certainly not educationally disadvantaged.

Home education and socialisation

Socialisation is of particular interest to home educators. Those unfamiliar with home education often assume that these students are not well-socialised and that traditional schooling is the only way to promote good social skills. However a large body of research indicates that home educating parents are providing an appropriate environment for the socialisation of their children.

Dr Richard Medlin, Chair of the Department of Psychology at Stetson University, Florida, notes that people have diverse understandings of the word "socialisation" – including social activity, social influence or social exposure. Medlin agrees that these may be a part of socialisation, but adopts Durkin's definition in the Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social Psychology: *the process whereby people acquire the rules of behaviour and systems, beliefs and attitudes that equip a person to function effectively as a member of a particular society.*[17] Durkin says socialisation takes place as children participate in "daily routines which immerse them directly in the values of their community".

Dr Medlin's research shows that home educated students are well socialised and able to function effectively in society.[18]

Researchers in the field of socialisation have found that home educated students have a higher self-concept than students from public schools.[19] One researcher concluded: "Insofar as self-concept is a reflector of socialisation, the findings of this study would suggest that few home-schooling children are socially deprived."[20]

Another study compared the performance of tertiary students in five categories of indicators – academic, cognitive, social, spiritual and psychomotor. The students had come from public, private and home education. They found that home educated students placed first in each category, leading by a large margin in everything except the psychomotor category. The study concluded that home educated students who attend university "are the leaders on campus".[21]

Shyers' study of problem behaviour

Dr Larry Shyers' socialisation research is of particular interest. He found that home educated students in Florida showed significantly higher assertiveness and self-concept ratings than traditionally schooled students. They also demonstrated significantly lower problem behaviour as a means of resolving social issues than children educated in schools.

Shyers compared the problem behaviour of 70 traditionally schooled and 70 home educated students aged eight, nine and ten. He found that the home educated students' problem behaviour rating was within accepted norms, whereas the problem behaviour rating of traditionally schooled students was two to three times higher than accepted norms.

Shyers found: *Traditionally schooled children tended to be considerably more aggressive, loud and competitive than were home schooled children of the same age… This finding supports the belief held by home school proponents that home schooled children are socially well adjusted.*[22] He concluded that more contact with caring adults as experienced by home educated students, is important in the development of positive social skills in children.

Community participation

Several studies have found that home educated students participate in a wide range of extracurricular and community activities outside the immediate family, both with children their own age and more than two years age difference. The activities include play groups, choirs, drama groups, music lessons, interactions with neighbours, organised sports, camps, community service groups and church related activities.[23]

Other researchers found that home educators tend to create small communities for learning and socialising beyond the family.[24] Another study found that home educated children spent an average of 20 to 29 hours per month in such activities.[25]

Home educated children actively participate in their communities and this interaction contributes to their social development.[26] Dr Medlin notes that traditional classroom schooling is only one agent of socialisation among many in the community.

Negative socialisation in some schools

School socialisation processes are not always positive. Developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner reported that peer-oriented children had more negative views of themselves, the peer group and their future, than children who were more adult-orientated. Peer-oriented children also displayed "more antisocial behaviour such as 'doing something illegal', 'playing hookey', lying, teasing other children, etc."[27]

Furthermore, schools are no longer viewed as ideal environments for the physical safety and social development of children. Bullying in Australian schools[28] and in early childhood education[29] is now common. The principal of a State College in Queensland, Bevan Brennan, listed current school problems as including student absenteeism, teacher absenteeism, student violence, trespassers, substance abuse and uncertainty about values.[30] Justice Roslyn Atkinson of the Queensland Law Reform Commission has warned that these problems point to a litigious future for Queensland education.[31]

Educational psychologist Alan Thomas (1995) says: "There is no research which demonstrates that school is necessary for social development. There is only opinion."[32] It is clear that home educated

children are not socially disadvantaged on the basis of their learning environment. On the contrary, they may enjoy some developmental and social advantages.

Legal issues

The number of Australian home educators has grown rapidly in the last 30 years, despite some legal difficulties. As pioneering parents removed their children from traditional compulsory schooling, educational authorities often viewed these children as truants and threatened court action. In the absence of formal legal recognition of home schooling, conflict between the regulatory views of state authorities and the civil liberties and rights of parents came to the fore in all states from the 1970s – 1990s.[33]

Happily, this situation has changed. All states now cover home schooling in legislation, which requires home schooled children to be registered and monitored by the state. Many families comply with such laws, but other families do not – taking the view that the education of one's own children at home is not the responsibility of governments, but the responsibility of parents.[34]

In Queensland, for example, the state government reported that in 2002, 85% of home schoolers did not comply with state requirements of registration and monitoring of students.[35] It is therefore difficult to determine the number of home educated children in Australia, but current estimates range from 20,000 to 60,000.

Students who are enrolled in state and non-state schools of distance education are viewed legally as attending a registered school. They are not subject to the same registration regime as home schooled students. Home education now enjoys a much more stable legal climate.

Outcomes after home education

Dr Brian Ray studied 7,306 US adults who had been home educated in the largest study of its kind in the world. He surveyed adults of a median age of 21.3, who had been home educated for at least seven years and had completed their secondary education. This longitudinal study demonstrated a vast array of positive life outcomes for home educated students, who had a high rate of participation in tertiary education and community organisations.

Dr Ray concluded: *The home educated adults in this study were very positive about having been homeschooled and toward homeschooling in general, actively engaged in their local communities, keeping abreast of current affairs, highly civically involved, tolerant of others expressing their viewpoints, attaining relatively high levels of formal education, religiously active and wide-ranging in their worldview beliefs.*[36]

Our personal experience

Diane and I had been educated in traditional schooling – experiencing both the highs and the lows of that social structure. We began to consider home education for our children (four sons and one daughter) after meeting several home educating families. They impressed us with the flexibility and liberty they enjoyed. Their lives revolved around family activities rather than a school timetable. We found the close relationships between parents and children and between siblings most attractive of all. We wanted this for our family.

We also noticed that home educated children were happy to talk to adults as well as children of a wide age range. They had not been conditioned, by being segregated for 12 years in the age-peer classrooms of traditional schooling, to relate mainly to children their own age.

We were both trained teachers, but we were nervous about beginning home education on our own. However we were able to connect with home education networks we learned about by word of mouth. We joined the Australian Christian Academy. We soon gained in confidence – as did other home educating parents we knew who had not been formally trained in teaching – and over 15 years we saw all our children complete year 12.

We wanted a Christian curriculum which taught science, maths and language through a Christian perspective. We looked at most of the curriculums in Australia at the time. In the end we chose ACE (Accelerated Christian Education) because it is based on an individualised approach and is easy to use. It meant we could keep going right through to the end of year 12.

ACE also allowed Diane to manage more easily our five children's education at their different academic levels. At various stages of our home education, we had children in primary and lower secondary and senior secondary school levels at the same time. We also liked ACE's many Scripture memory verses, as well as its teaching and reinforcing the development of good character.

Our children also attended two small Christian schools for six years. They enjoyed the schools and did not have any trouble relating to their peers. The schools emphasised discipleship and family values.

Diane was and is the heart of our family. She did the majority of the formal teaching during the day, but it is important for the father to be a part of home education, both formally and informally. I did mathematics with the older ones before breakfast for a few years, and led Bible reading at night.

We found that socialisation is one of home education's greatest strengths. Regular, extended communication with loving parents and other adults and children enables children to develop confidence and strong conversational and social skills. Our children get on well with others. They have integrated with people of all ages in sports clubs, youth groups, the university environment, their work places, our church and the wider community. The vast majority of home educated children we have known have had social interactions with other adults and children in various community groups, while avoiding negative social influences often present in schools – bullying, gangs, and pressure to conform to non-Christian values in clothes, language and entertainment.

I have met hundreds of parents whose children had not been doing well at school, but improved greatly after they began home education. I also know of gifted children who have accelerated their education because of the freedom home study brings. Others, with special talents in areas such as sport or music, have been able to excel in their careers because of home education's flexibility. Diane and I have found that home education enables children to build upon their strengths and to remediate weaknesses because it treats them as individuals – far more than traditional schooling is able to do.

At first our families disapproved of our decision to home educate. They thought we were disadvantaging our children academically and socially. Later most of our relatives saw that their fears were unfounded – all of our children went on to complete tertiary degree and diploma courses after year 12, and two have master's degrees. However some people never change their opinions. We explained this to our children and helped them to cope with misunderstandings they encountered from some friends and family members.

In general, our home education costs were very affordable compared with public and private education. During our most expensive years, when we were home educating all five children, we spent less than $1800 per year in total. Like most home educating families we lived on a single income, so it was vital to keep costs to a minimum.

We were never inspected by any state education official, but when my children were much older we invited the education minister's home school reviewer to come and look at what we were doing. He had never been in a home educator's home before, and he liked what he saw. He asked one of my children what was the greatest disadvantage of home education. My son replied, "When you get sick, you can't have a day off." The reviewer laughed!

Tertiary entrance - Australia

A small Tasmanian study of adults who had been home educated found that nearly 80% had completed tertiary courses and gone on to employment in technical, scientific, teaching or nursing fields.[37]

A survey of adults who had graduated in home education from Year 12 at the Australian Christian Academy in Queensland found that:

- 90% said their home education experience had prepared them well for life after their studies;
- 81% said their home education had not limited their later educational opportunities;
- 98% said their home education had not limited their career opportunities;
- 92% believed their home education had advantaged them as adults;
- 94% stated that they were happy with their educational experience;
- only 5% said they would not home educate their own children.[38]

A survey of 438 home-educated Australian adults demonstrated that such students are able to enter tertiary courses in all states of Australia. After completing their home education, 36% of respondents had entered bachelor degree courses; 21% had entered professional diploma courses; 43% had entered trades and training via apprenticeships and certificate courses at TAFE. These results are comparable to the post-school study pathways of students from traditional schooling and prove that home education is no barrier to tertiary entrance.[39]

Conclusion

The Australian home education movement has grown out of the desire of parents to transmit their own worldview, values and standards of literacy, numeracy and behaviour to their children, coupled with an increasing dissatisfaction with traditional schooling.

Research has demonstrated that home educated students are achieving well academically. They are not socially disadvantaged. They are able to enter university, TAFE colleges and trades at the end of their home education.

Not all parents desire or are able to home educate their children. Home education is one of several options from which parents may choose. With the development of home education networks (accessible via the internet) and schools of distance education, parents now have more home education resources and guidance to help them.

Along with other bona fide education methods, home education has proved to be a valid option, deserving recognition and respect in the Australian education landscape. ■

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