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How Western Australian Parents Manage the Home Schooling of their Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

Few studies have examined home schooling in Australia and as this growing phenomenon is yet to receive the research it deserves, it is likely that families who home educate are not acquiring the assistance necessary for management to reach its full potential. This paper is one attempt to address the deficit which exists. It reports the findings of a study into how Western Australian parents manage the home schooling of their children with disabilities. A case study approach was adopted, utilising grounded theory methods of data analysis, to examine six home schooling families. Ten propositions emerged from the case studies, to provide an understanding of the parents' reasons for home schooling their children with disabilities, the strategies they use to educate from a home base and their concerns and needs regarding this educational alternative. While these propositions provide insight into how parents manage the process of educating their children from home, the findings also have implications for theory, practice and future research aimed at developing more specific theories for different groups of home schoolers.

Introduction

Home schooling is an alternative approach to institutional schooling that has recently gained momentum in a number of Western countries, including Australia (Harding 2003, Rothermel 2000). This educational alternative eventuates when parents (or guardians) make a conscious decision to provide an education for their child or children, replacing that offered by formal schools. The parent(s) undertake the main teaching or facilitating role, usually from a home base, and assume primary responsibility for their child's educational programme.

While there appears to be an abundant array of existing home schooling definitions, Jacob's (1991) definition is all encompassing:

Home education occurs when the parents choose to educate their children from a home base. The choice is the outcome of a conviction that home based education will better meet the child's needs, and may not simply be the result of the child being unable to attend school because of disability or geographical isolation. The parents plan, implement and evaluate the child's learning program using a variety of resources (p. 13).

This definition of home schooling exemplifies the context in which the term will be used throughout the paper. It is important to note that the children concerned in this study were not home schooled simply because their disability necessitated it. Rather, as will be revealed, the parents articulated that a number of reasons lead them to the conviction that home schooling would generate greater educational progress for their children with disabilities. In accordance with the position of Hunter (1994) it is assumed that home schooling does not refer to children educated at home purely due to geographic isolation or reasons of individual necessity, such as hospitalisation and other involuntary forms of disablement, that prevent attendance at school. The assumption is also made that parents opt to home school because they believe this alternative will provide an educational experience superior to that offered by the school system.

The term 'disability' is used loosely throughout this paper, encompassing "any continuing condition that restricts everyday activities" (DSC 2004, p. 1). The severity of each disability differed between each home schooled child in the study and a range of disability types were encountered, including those of a physical, sensory, psychiatric and intellectual nature. Currently in Western Australia (WA), children with disabilities experience a variety of educational settings. The vast majority of children with an intellectual disability attend educational support schools, centres or units. However, there has been a growing emphasis on the need to include such children in mainstream education and place them in regular classrooms (O'Donoghue & Chalmers 2000). While the Western Australian Department of Education (DoE) is currently reviewing the educational services available for children with disabilities and intending to support an inclusive educational system, little attention has been paid to those families who have engaged in another legitimate alternative, namely, home schooling.

Background

In Australia home schooling legislation differs between states. In WA the School Education Act 1999 (The Government of WA 1998) provides parents with three choices for the education of their children – at the local Government (public) school, at a non-government (private) school of their choice, or through home schooling. Before commencing home schooling, parents must

register with DoE. Once the application to educate a child from home is approved, a Moderator from DoE contacts the family members and visits them at least once a year to monitor progress and learning problems. Home schooled children with disabilities may also be entitled to assistance from the Disability Services Commission (DSC) of WA through the allocation of Local Area Coordinators (LACs) who visit and support families. The DSC also provides physiotherapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy to students with disabilities who are registered with them and who qualify for intellectual disability based on IQ testing. Otherwise, however, home schooling parents of children with disabilities are left to their own devices. Any other necessary support or assistance is achieved only on the initiation of the parents and the networks they uncover. The most utilised home schooling support network in WA is the Home Based Learning Network (HBLN). HBLN is a state wide network and consists of home schooling families who share information, resources and skills.

In Australia, as in most other countries, the true number of home schoolers is difficult to envisage as there is no central point for home schooling statistics (McNeice 2001). Additionally, some parents do not inform state governments of their home schooling activities, primarily because they consider the law to be a restriction on their responsibility to educate their own children. Consequently, they remain 'hidden' to school authorities. These factors, impeding the easy measurement of figures, have resulted in varying estimates of the national home schooling population. Recent statistics, based on the 2001 census population, estimated over 28 000 students were home educated in Australia in 2003 (Strange 2004). While it is impossible to accurately know how many home schoolers exist in Australia, there does appear to be a clear trend towards significant increases in recent years. According to McNeice (2001), various independent researchers have recently calculated the annual home schooling growth rate to range between 20 to 30 percent, indicating that the movement is growing at a rate that far surpasses the growth of the Australian population. In WA, a newspaper article in 1997 revealed that HBLN estimated around 1 200 students were home taught, while DoE placed the figure at just over 900 (Butler 1997). Despite the discrepancy in figures it is interesting to note that the number of home schooled children in WA has increased significantly since the late 1990s as the state's home schooling population is currently estimated to stand at around 3 000 students (Strange 2004). Accordingly, the development of a substantial research base is now opportune.

Home schooling is by no means a new phenomenon, yet the last three decades has seen an increasing trend in the engagement of this educational alternative in numerous countries. In

response to the recent home schooling movement a research base in this area of education has emerged. However, the majority of research has been undertaken primarily in the United States of America (USA), where home schooling is the fastest growing educational phenomenon and few studies have been carried out in Australia. World wide the existing body of research on home schooling is also relatively small and incomplete. In particular, it appears that particular categories of home schoolers and the processes involved in their undertaking of this modern version of a historically enduring educational alternative have been overlooked. This is especially so in the case of children with disabilities.

While there are several studies from the USA pertaining to the home schooling of children with disabilities, investigations of this kind are lacking in Australia. Research from the USA indicates many parents turn to home schooling because they believe their children with disabilities were spending too much time sitting in a public school, unattended and untaught, because one-on-one instruction was simply not feasible (Farris 1998). Such parents feel individual children can easily get lost in a system set up to meet generalised needs. Research has also revealed home schooling offers more individual attention, a vital ingredient necessary for academic success in the education of children with disabilities (Van Kuren 2000). A study by Duvall (1997) found that home schooled children with disabilities were academically engaged about two and a half times as often as their public school counterparts. The study indicated home schooling is beneficial for students with disabilities and that parents, even though most are not certified teachers, can create instructional environments at home that assist their children to improve their academic skills.

Research undertaken in the USA indicates that children with disabilities can benefit tremendously from the individualised attention that home schooling offers. However, the relevance of such studies for the Australian home schooling context is somewhat limited due to policy differences between the two countries. In particular, greater support and resource assistance is available to parents who home school their children with disabilities in the USA. Consequently, a strong case exists to make parents a prime focus in Australian home schooling research. Chapman & O'Donoghue (2000) emphasise the lack of substantial research on those parents who have opted for home schooling and the scant attention paid to how these parents manage the processes involved. The study reported in this paper responds to the lack of Australian home schooling research and addresses the need to examine home schooling from the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities in WA.

Details of the Study

The study reported here focused on the central research question: How do WA parents manage the home schooling of their children with disabilities? As the field of home schooling children with disabilities has undergone little research, the study was exploratory in nature. Prominence was placed on how parents ‘manage’ the education of their children with disabilities from a home base, implying an emphasis on process. Thus, the study was located within the general area of qualitative research. Specifically, it involved studying how the home schooling parents managed the following:

1. educational aims, curriculum, teaching, ‘school’ organisation, and their own preparation as teachers;
2. their relationships with the State educational bureaucracy, particularly DoE; and
3. the rest of their lives, that is, those activities in which they are engaged when they are not engaged directly in home schooling.

The data base for addressing the major research question was developed as a series of case studies on individual home schooling families. These case studies were based on the following specific aims:

1. to identify the parents’ reasons for engaging in home schooling;
2. to identify the strategies they use at home; and
3. to develop an understanding of their concerns and needs regarding home schooling.

By utilising a case study approach that examined six individual home schooling families, unique cases were studied in different contexts.

It was necessary to restrict the scope of this study to those children with disabilities home schooled within the Perth metropolitan area, primarily to make it more manageable. It was also necessary to study home schooling in urban areas separately from that undertaken in rural or remote localities due to the different opportunities available, such as accessibility to resources, networks and support groups. The six home schooling families who participated in the study resided in various locations throughout the Perth metropolitan area, educated children of mixed ages, gender and disabilities, and differed in the number of children they were home schooling. Within the six families there were eleven children with disabilities who were educated from home: five of primary school age; five of high school age; and one eighteen year old who was employed on a part time basis, yet was still home schooled to learn specific skills for the workforce and community.

As the main purpose of the study was to develop greater knowledge and understanding within the field, rather than generalisability, a case study approach was deemed appropriate. Interviewing was used as the main data collection technique, in order to complement the aim of revealing the participants' perspectives on the issue of home schooling their children with disabilities. The semi-structured interviews were triangulated, where possible, with observations, written records of parents, policy documents and home schooling information provided by DoE. Grounded theory methods of data gathering and analysis were then adopted to compare the separate cases, distinguish parallels and develop propositions. The purpose of engaging in the grounded theory mode of analysis in the study was based on the need to generate abstract concepts and propositions in order to explain basic patterns common in the home schooling lives of children with disabilities. However, it is important to emphasise that the propositions that emerged in the data have the status of 'grounded' hypotheses rather than 'truth'. Thus, further research opportunities are left wide open to others who may wish to test such propositions in different contexts.

Findings

Ten propositions emerged in this study in relation to each family's management of the home schooling process. Each of these will be considered in turn, with a brief discussion preceding each proposition in order to present an overview of significant findings among the individual cases. It is acknowledged that the propositions have been established around the six families interviewed and no claim is made that the propositions are "inclusive beyond the defined set" (Stainback & Stainback, 1984: 299). The propositions are categorised under six subheadings derived from the specific aims of the research. The prominent findings of the study address these specific aims, which directly apply to the central research question. The ten propositions provide insight into why parents of children with disabilities necessitate the move to home school, provide an awareness of the processes involved in educating children with disabilities from home, and provide an understanding of the family's concerns and needs regarding this alternative.

Reasons for Home Schooling

There appeared to be several prevalent reasons behind each family's move to this educational alternative. All the families in the study, except one, referred to negative socialisation within schools as being a contributing factor in their decision to home school:

Mother 1: ... there was that negative socialisation that probably made my decision. I didn't want all that negativity around her. I wanted her out of that environment.

Mother 2: It was more the bullying within the school, due to his disability, that led to the need to home school ... Now they don't get that negative socialisation from school.

The issue of negative socialisation is alluded to by Hunter (1994) who discusses the fear of mental, physical or spiritual harm being inflicted on a child as one of the three reasons for home schooling. Chapman and O'Donoghue (2000) make reference to the negative effects of peer pressure and other unwanted influences within the categories of 'Dissatisfaction with traditional schools' and 'Protection from unwanted influences' (pp. 24-28). While the mother in Family Three did not directly mention negative socialisation in her rationale behind home schooling, she stated that her daughter was; "... learning inappropriate behaviours and self-abusive behaviours within the school system". Of the five families that discussed the impact of negative socialisation, in all cases the teasing, rejection or bullying experienced was related to their child's disability, creating significant stress and diverting attention away from learning.

The majority of parents also believed that the insufficient academic progress witnessed while their children were at school justified the need to remove them from the system. Dissatisfaction with the amounts their children were learning at school was attributed to a lack of resources, a misunderstanding of their children's capabilities and an inability to deliver education consistent with techniques used at home. Despite the perceived reasons for the lack of learning, in all cases the parents felt their children were not benefiting from school. Home schooling was seen to provide an opportunity to advance their children's education, allowing the curriculum to focus on the specific and individual needs of each child. This reasoning is compatible with Ella (1993) who asserts that home schoolers believe they are able to provide an individual curriculum to meet their children's needs.

One widespread reason leading to home schooling, acknowledged by all parents in the study, was the failure of schools to understand their children with regards to their academic and social capabilities or the nature of the disabilities themselves. The following families witnessed academic incompetence on the schools' behalf:

Mother 1: I think they just thought she was capable of more than she was. They didn't know her capabilities. I don't think they had taken the time to judge it actually.

Mother 5: ... she wasn't giving him work beyond his capabilities. She was holding Neil back.

One family felt the school attended by their daughter misjudged her social capabilities to the extent that this factor dominated the decision to home school. It is interesting to note that in the two families who home schooled children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) both parents felt that the school teachers misunderstood the symptoms associated with their children's condition. Consequently, the children were treated in an unacceptable manner, as the teachers' reprimands drew unwanted attention that adversely affected their relationships with other students.

All of the families interviewed revealed an amalgamation of reasons contributing to the need for home schooling their children. This is consistent with Chapman and O'Donoghue's (2000) observation that "many home schoolers choose to educate their own children not for one particular reason, but for a combination of reasons" (p. 24). The ability of the parents to acknowledge the need for an alternative and to recognise the need for home schooling, and their willingness to assume responsibility for their children's education, are significant initial steps in the management of the process. Three main reasons for home schooling children with disabilities emerged and are presented in the following proposition.

***Proposition One:** Home schooling parents typically assume responsibility for the education of their children with disabilities for combinations of two or more reasons. These reasons are predominantly concerned with the negative socialisation encountered in schools, insufficient academic progress and a failure by schools to understand their children's academic and social capabilities or the nature of their child's disability.*

Managing the Process Itself

As a result of the differences between each child's disability, age, educational needs and individual learning styles, there are bound to be variations between each family's management of the home schooling process. The aim of this subsection is not to illustrate the differences between each family's home schooling approach based on their existing circumstances, but rather to depict the common elements that assumed a vital role in the management of the process. Some main factors emerged in relation to how parents manage the home schooling of their children with disabilities in the areas of content, resources, structure, teaching strategies, evaluation and assistance from others outside of the family home. One initial similarity noted between the families in the study was that in all cases the mother was the main teacher while the father engaged in full time employment. While the situation had recently been altered in Family Four as

the father had increased his teaching role, the mother still assumed prime responsibility for teaching.

Prior to the commencement of home schooling the parents in each family had to determine their children's level of understanding and knowledge to provide a basis for them to start teaching from:

Mother 1: I went through some of the work that she had done for the year and she really hadn't done anything ... I realised from the start that we had to go back to basics.

Mother 3: I knew exactly what I wanted to teach her. I'd worked at Murdoch University on the Autistic Project. That experience had taught me many things and I knew exactly what I wanted to teach her and how I wanted to teach her.

Mother 4: ... we did a diagnostic test and found out if there were any gaps and what sort of levels they were at. We just wanted to find out in each of the subjects if there was a good foundation already established. So we went on from there.

Whether it was through prior experience, the examination of past work or diagnostic testing, all the families in the study were able to establish the degree of their child's knowledge and subsequently the content level necessary to commence teaching from. This initial step in the management process is outlined in the following proposition.

Proposition Two: *Having established the need for home schooling, the initial step in managing the process requires parents to determine the level of their child's educational understanding through prior experience, research or testing, in order to ascertain the content that will be taught.*

The parents examined put a significant emphasis on teaching their children life skills rather than academic content. It was apparent that the greater the severity of the child's intellectual disability, the more prominence the parents placed on the attainment of life skills and independent living. Once the content was determined, the resources were obtained. The parents all acquired teaching materials from one or more of the following sources: books retained from the schooling of their other children; educational bookstores; the Internet; their child's previous school; local libraries; other home schooling acquaintances; and previous teaching experiences.

All of the families adopted a loose home schooling structure with no set timetable, the exception being Family Three as the Mastery Learning methodology utilised by the mother provided the basis of her teaching strategy and required a set structure for its effectiveness. Four of the families

began home schooling with a very structured approach, incorporating many elements of the school system into their teaching style due to their own educational background. However, over time, with increased experience and confidence these parents gradually shifted away from a planned structure towards a more flexible teaching approach, consistent with the findings of Simich (1998). Three of the families also admitted to trying numerous home schooling styles once they felt more comfortable in managing the process. Excluding the mother in Family Three, who admitted her approach to home schooling was more structured than most, the other parents all felt that a flexible structure was more suited to their existing situations. The reasoning being that their children may encounter unforeseen difficulties relating to their disabilities and the absence of a timetable allows setbacks in the process to be managed more easily. Additionally the adaptability provided by this home schooling approach allows the children to learn new concepts when they are ready and their changing educational interests to be met with little difficulty. The importance of a flexible home schooling structure for children with disabilities is summed up below.

Proposition Three: *The majority of parents adopt a loose home schooling structure without a set timetable because flexibility is required when teaching children with disabilities due to the greater occurrence of unforeseen circumstances and the ability to teach new concepts when the student is ready.*

None of the parents used formal evaluation techniques to assess their children's educational progress. All the parents explained that the deep understanding they have of their children and the closeness of their relationship with them allowed informal evaluation to suffice. Through personal observations of how their children responded to different situations and life, questioning and witnessing knowledge being put into practice, the parents believed they received an accurate indication how their child was developing through home schooling. The evaluation techniques utilised by the parents are contained within the proposition below.

Proposition Four: *Home schooling parents do not formally evaluate educational progress because the amount of time they devote to, and the in depth understanding they have of, their children with disabilities allows personal observations, informal questioning and witnessing the utilisation of knowledge in different contexts to suffice.*

Managing Impediments

The parents with little prior teaching experience commented that DoE did not provide any initial guidelines on home schooling structures, teaching techniques, content and resources:

Mother 2: The Education Department did not provide any guidelines for the sort of materials that were needed ... I felt inadequate at first, like I wasn't properly prepared ... It would be nice if the Education Department could give some sort of plan or idea, at least where to start from.

Mother 5: The Education Department gave us absolutely nothing. Initially there was no guidance. Teachers bounce off ideas but it's harder for us because we don't have those sort of connections, especially to begin with ... I would have liked the Moderator to tell me where I could get resources.

Families Two and Five felt their initial confidence and ability to manage the process would have been improved had DoE supplied them with some guidelines. The initial lack of home schooling information bestowed to parents had less of an impact on those families who had undertaken extensive research, maintained a positive relationship with the school or had prior experience in education. However, these families still commented on the lack of practical suggestions and the absence of assistance offered, which lead to the fifth proposition below.

Proposition Five: *Parents who are unfamiliar with the field of education find that the absence of detailed information on home schooling structures, teaching techniques, content and resources initially limits their capacity to manage the process.*

All the parents interviewed felt that numerous impediments were associated with the minimum involvement exhibited by the DSC in the home schooling of children with disabilities:

Mother 2: They don't tell you what sort of assistance they can give you so it's hard to know what to ask for. They don't give you a lot of information. I've tried a few times to get assistance and they were unable to help us.

Mother 3: I found them to be nice people but they couldn't provide a service ... their funding was such that they were only able to provide minimal support ... They didn't have enough staff and they didn't have any resources.

Mother 4: They have no role in home schooling ... DSC don't see education as part of their framework. I find that a struggle ... there's kind of that informal overlap that I don't think is helpful at all. It's not in the best interest of the child.

The mothers in Families Five and Six also believe the DSC has a minimal influence on home schooling. In Family Five the mother stated that the LACs, "... can't provide everything and can't do everything". The mother was of the opinion that LACs contribute more to home schooling than do Moderators, advocating a greater necessity for DoE to improve their assistance as "home schooling is their league". All the parents acknowledged the disability domain as the DSC's main sphere of influence. However, the parents envisaged several distinct factors that could alleviate the hindrances encountered and these are summarised in the following proposition.

Proposition Six: *The DSC needs to incorporate education into their framework and clearly define their role in education as their ability to contribute knowledge on appropriate teaching techniques for children with disabilities will enable parents to deliver more effective home education.*

In the families where parents had either attempted or succeeded to arrange for their children to attend particular classes at school, engagement was only requested for non-academic activities. While the mother in one family had maintained a positive relationship with the school, which enabled her daughter to attend weekly art and sport classes, other parents were not as fortunate. When Family Three commenced home schooling, non-academic contact time was organised with a local school, however the arrangement proved to be unsuccessful because of the bullying the child encountered relating to her disability. This experience supports the comment made by the mother in Family Four; "You can negotiate with some schools but it is not widely done because it's difficult to organise administratively and it can be disruptive for the social dynamics of the students". The parents in Families Four and Five tried to involve their children in non-academic school activities, to expand their children's socialisation and make use of the school's resources. In both instances the schools would not permit attendance, denying the home schooled children involvement because they were not covered under insurance.

Two perpetual impediments confronting all parents engaged in this educational alternative were opposition towards the home schooling option and the absence of funding. The parents in the study witnessed varying degrees of opposition towards this alternative from both family members and people within the community. The parents in four of the families expressed that the only way to alleviate the opposition faced by home schoolers was to increase awareness and educate society on the benefits this alternative offers, in order to remove misconceived perceptions. However, it was noted that this requires open-mindedness and a greater acceptance of diversity within the community. In terms of funding, only one family indicated that they received financial assistance

through Post School Option funding, available from the age of sixteen for employment training and alternatives to employment, such as recreational activities. However, the children in the other families were all below sixteen years of age and had not acquired funding to help fulfill their home schooling needs. The father in Family Four recapitulated the inequity and difficulties associated with the absence of funding for home schoolers:

Father 4: ... as far as resources are concerned we've never had any financial assistance with resources or anything like that. Sometimes meeting educational needs can be difficult to do at home as some things require a fair degree of resources and specialised equipment. If the Education Department were really committed to the education of children they ought to be giving us the same resources that they do to schools, even if that's in the way of providing the option to out-source some things or use local schools as a resource.

The lack of funding parents directly receive to aid in the management of home schooling was referred to in all interviews, however the absence of monetary assistance appeared, as would be expected, a greater impediment to the families with less financial wealth or more children to educate. The proposition below relates to the lack of financial assistance and the need for more accessible arrangements with schools.

***Proposition Seven:** Families undergo the home schooling process with limited funding, which restricts the teaching materials utilised. Therefore more accessible arrangements with schools are required, particularly in non-academic areas, so that children educated at home are not disadvantaged in terms of resources and specialised equipment.*

Managing the Process by Forming Views on Its Effectiveness

All parents commented on the social benefits associated with home schooling, compatible with Nicholls (1997) who also discussed the social opportunities available through this educational alternative. Reference was made by all parents to the more positive social interactions that their children with disabilities had experienced since being educated from home. While most families mentioned it in passing, the father in Family Four specifically alluded to his view that home schooling enables children to, "... experience the reality and learn from that". This is consistent with Klicka (1997) who argues that home schooling prepares children for the 'real world', allowing them to engage in social activities, receive 'hands on' experience and interact with adults. It was apparent that children with disabilities have numerous learning needs that are met through everyday life experiences. The parents felt that home schooling enabled them to ensure

that their children received a thorough understanding of life skills and an ability to interact with people of all ages, so that they could eventually live independently and prosper in society.

The one-on-one teaching, the flexibility and the ability to address the individual learning needs of a child were the predominant benefits expressed by all parents in the study:

Mother 1: ... one-on-one teaching has to be a big advantage. She really needs one-on-one with everything she does as you have to try and keep her on task all the time ... At home there is more flexibility and you don't have to stick to a timetable.

Mother 3: One-to-one training, teaching her in her learning style, understanding her and being flexible with what we deliver have been effective ... The programme is totally individualised in comparison to the school system and the ability to make gains is maximised by the one-on-one training.

Mother 5: Purely because it's flexible, it works and they are doing what they want to do. Their needs are being met ... it focuses more on their interests, their concentration and the way they approach their learning.

As previously mentioned, the parents felt that the flexibility offered through home schooling suited their family's circumstances because it allowed them to work around appointments and illness relating to their children's disabilities by making up for lost learning and picking up where learning left off. All the parents mentioned that the learning experiences home schooling offers had resulted in educational progress, indicating its viability for children with disabilities. There was unanimity from all the parents interviewed that the individual needs of their children were effectively met by the flexibility and specific teaching focus provided through home schooling and this is outlined in the proposition below.

Proposition Eight: *Parents find it easier to manage the process knowing that the one-on-one teaching and the flexibility available to them through home schooling enables their child's specific learning needs to be addressed, allowing social and academic progress to prevail.*

Managing the Process by Forming Views on the Inadequacies within the Traditional School System

Most parents believed that schools are incapable of providing adequate education for all children because students develop at different rates, both intellectually and physically, and are endowed with distinct learning styles, interests and abilities. Even a teacher admitted to one of the mothers that the school was not meeting her child's needs, while DoE admitted to another parent that the system was inadequately equipped to cope with her son's medical needs. According to one

mother, who had been heavily involved in home schooling for ten years, “more and more parents are realising the system is not satisfactory for a variety of reasons. There’s no money, the training is not there and their children are not receiving the education they hoped”. The mother’s own experience and involvement in home schooling had led her to believe that this educational alternative was on the increase. The inability of schools to offer children with disabilities the individual attention they require to learn was one significant inadequacy parents observed within the school system.

The other inadequacy agreed upon by all parents and supported by Klicka (1997), was that the school system did not provide a healthy learning environment for their children due to prevalent negative socialisation. Parents frequently discussed the negativity their children encountered from students within schools who ridiculed and excluded them because of their differences:

Mother 1: She has struggled with negativity right through school. She looks a bit different and kids have given her such a hard time.

Mother 2: There was severe bullying. He’d always been picked on at high school but he never told us. ... Then there was an incident at school when he was attacked.

Mother 3: We used to do non-academic contact time in the local primary school but I soon stopped that because the bullying and teasing was horrendous.

Father 4: I think she came away from school with negative feelings of not being accepted and included.

In the case of one child the bullying experiences were worsened by the school’s inadequacy in dealing with the situation appropriately, as the intimidators were not punished and the safety of the victim was not ensured. Parents from four of the families expressed that the bullying in schools created emotional problems, which were detrimental to a child’s education. Such inadequacies within the school system are depicted in the following proposition.

***Proposition Nine:** The varying educational needs of children with disabilities are often not accommodated within the system because schools lack an individual approach to teaching and the prevalence of bullying creates an environment adverse to learning.*

Managing the Process by Utilising Support Groups

All the mothers said that the moral support their husbands provided had given them confidence in their ability to teach and encouraged them to pursue home schooling at times of doubt. Assistance

from other people outside of the family home had also helped a number of families manage the process with greater ease. While only one family had received support from their previous school, the child in Family Three had a tutor who took responsibility for teaching one day a week. Chapman and O'Donoghue (2000) discuss the use of a tutor to help manage the content contained in the home schooling process, but in the instance of Family Three the tutor was hired so that the mother could engage in employment. In another family, the two eldest children attended an alternative high school on a part time basis, the youngest child attended a special school once a week and the middle child received professional assistance with his reading. Only parents from two of the families made specific reference to the support they received from their Moderators, who provided an assortment of teaching ideas and activities.

While the mother from one family was still actively seeking to utilise the support of HBLN, all the other parents viewed this home schooling network very highly, believing it had offered them much needed assistance and information:

Mother 2: Activities organised by the Home Based Learning Network allows them to socialise with other home schooling kids of all ages. A lot of assistance comes from ideas that I've picked up from the Home Based Learning Conferences.

Mother 3: I received a lot of support from HBLN. I found them to be a great network with great families ... I still have my name as a contact person. I get a lot of calls from families of children with disabilities who are considering home education. They want some reassurance and to know a bit about how I did it.

The home schooling parents obtained crucial assistance from HBLN and it appeared to be the main source of information relating to this alternative. All the families emphasised the initial importance of HBLN's support, as it offered a forum for parents to meet other home schoolers who were willing to share their experiences and teaching ideas. HBLN also increased the parents' confidence in their ability to manage the process because learning about the successes of other families gave an indication of the effectiveness and viability of home schooling. Word of mouth appeared to be most influential in the decision to undertake home schooling. Parents from three of the families mentioned that they had learnt about this alternative through acquaintances who home schooled a child with a disability, while the home schooling success of another mother had prompted her friend's engagement in the process. The extent to which support impacted the parents' management of home schooling is expressed in the proposition below.

Proposition Ten: *Alongside the moral support from their spouses, parents who home school children with disabilities receive most assistance, information and home schooling contacts from the Home Based Learning Network, whose encouragement and verification of the viability of this alternative increases parents' confidence in their ability to manage the process.*

Conclusion

While the propositions in this study specifically provide insight into how WA parents manage the process of educating their children with disabilities from home, the findings also have implications for theory, practice and further research. The latter implication is of great significance because the propositions are tentative and serve the purpose of framing future research aimed at developing more specific theories for different groups of home schoolers. This in turn will ensure that the needs of all home schooling families are recognised and fulfilled through policies and practices aimed to support and enhance the effectiveness of home schooling. Without adequate research it is difficult to envisage what can be done to make home schooling as beneficial as possible for home schooled children and their families. As the home schooling phenomenon in Australia is yet to receive the research it deserves, it is likely that families who home educate are not acquiring the assistance necessary for management to reach its full potential. However, the sheer commitment and determination displayed by the parents in this study, alongside the sacrifices willingly made, has enabled them to manage the home schooling process more effectively and achieve educational advances for their children with disabilities.

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