

Investigating young children's perceptions of homeschooling ®

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ABSTRACT

Despite the proliferation of institutional schooling during this century, voluntary home-based education is a growing phenomenon in a number of western countries (eg. Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, United States) (Mayberry et al, 1995; Meighan, 1995; Hunter, 1994). Parents who choose to "homeschool" do so for a number of reasons and pursue a variety of methods. An emerging body of research has investigated the reasons parents give for homeschooling, but little of the research literature has to date looked at children's perceptions of their home-based education experiences. This paper reports on interviews, conducted in 1998, with a number of young children who were asked about their perceptions of their home-based education. Their voices indicate that they view homeschooling favourably.

Institutional schooling, viewed today as the normal process of education for the masses has not always been available. The educational norm for pre-industrial societies was home education, yet today it is often viewed as an aberration. Current research evidence suggests homeschooling can be a viable educational alternative, worthy of serious consideration by policy makers, educational professionals and researchers. With the increasing evidence that the youth of today are finding school less relevant to their lives, policy-makers should be considering alternatives in order to cater to individual needs. Homeschooling can incorporate teaching strategies that have long been held to be educationally effective - vertical age grouping, one-on-one tuition, peer tutoring, supportive child-adult relationships, child-centred and initiated learning. These strategies can involve a child cognitively in their own learning, yet these strategies are hard to pursue in institutional settings. This paper suggests how we may bridge the divide that currently exists between home-based education and institutional schooling in order to bring benefits to children and families alike as we head towards the year 2000.

Investigating young children's perceptions of homeschooling

The notion that education necessarily involves attendance at school is foundational to much contemporary thinking about education. While attendance at school is the recognised form of education for the majority of Australia's children, and indeed for children from many other countries, there are some parents who choose to undertake their children's education at home, thereby challenging the idea that education and school necessarily go together. Homeschooling or home-education can be defined as follows: parents make a conscious decision to provide an education for their child or children in place of that provided by schools, and where the parent or parents are the main teachers or facilitators in the program of education.

Homeschooling is a growing phenomenon in a number of countries (Meighan, 1995; Hunter, 1994; Common & MacMullen, 1986). In the USA, it is estimated that over 500,000 children are being home-educated (Lines, 1996), while in the UK 10,000 families are reported to be homeschooling (Meighan, 1995). In 1994 it was estimated that at least 10,000 people were involved in homeschooling in Australia (Hunter, 1994). While in the USA there is a growing body of research on home-education, in Australia only limited research literature exists. Partly this is because conducting research on home-education is often difficult; homeschoolers are a marginalised group and gaining access can be a problem (Mayberry, Knowles, Ray & Marlow, 1995). The researcher must invest time and effort to gain trust in the homeschooling community. Much of the research, therefore, has been conducted on a non-representative sample of homeschooling families, and presumably conducted by researchers who have shown themselves to be supportive of the homeschooling concept. For the same reason sensitive issues may also have been avoided as research topics. One of the neglected areas of research has been children's perceptions of their home-education (Adams & Purdy 1996; Mayberry et al, 1995). This study attempted to redress this by investigating Australian children's perceptions of their home-education.

What is termed the "traditional educational system" has really only been around for about 200 years (Ignas, 1979) and has been dominant only since about the mid 19th century (Smith, 1979) yet school is now the central activity of children's lives. Schooling has been transformed from a luxury to a necessity and the state has become increasingly responsible for school maintenance and staffing (Boyd & King, 1975; Smith, 1979). The system has been condemned as ineffective - it does not serve all children equally well - and inefficient by numerous educational theorists and writers (e.g. Holt, 1964; Smith, 1986; Illich, 1970; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Reimer, 1971; Kelley, 1947; Middleton & Hill, 1996). It does not do what it is supposed to do and is very expensive to operate and maintain (Ignas, 1979). Society's response to the failure of mass education is constant innovations in curriculum, teaching methods, classroom organisation (Humphreys & Newcombe, 1975) - but not a fundamental analysis and evaluation of the institution itself, which is what is sorely needed today. There is however, a trend emerging in the USA wherein some educators and schools are working in partnership with homeschooled children being allowed access to resources, independent study programs or part-time enrolments (Dahm, 1996).

Despite this criticism of the institution of schooling, home-education has usually been considered a subversive activity, resisted by educators and education authorities. It has been suggested home-education threatens some of the implicit assumptions to which the educational system clings, such as "there is an important body of knowledge and skills that children should learn", "children will learn this knowledge best in schools", "children learn best in age-graded classrooms" and "teaching is a highly specialised and complex activity that can best be conducted by trained and licensed people" (Common & MacMullen, 1986, p. 7; Meighan, 1984; Smith, 1979). But those assumptions may not stand up to the test. Parental reasons for choosing to homeschool challenge those assumptions. These reasons include dissatisfaction with the curriculum content, conflicts in values between home and school, perceived ineffectiveness of schools, a desire on the part of parents to maintain family unity, concerns about adverse socialisation as a result of school attendance, bullying, regimentation of school, children's special needs not being catered for and family lifestyle (such as an itinerant lifestyle for circus families) (Van Galen, 1989; Webb, 1990; Wartes, 1989; Barratt-Peacock, 1997).

The topic of homeschooling arouses strong feelings - for and against. Opponents frequently voice concerns about the social development of children educated at home (Webb, 1989). However, the research on the effectiveness of home-based education demonstrates that in terms of social skills, social maturity, academic achievement, confidence and communication skills, homeschooled children are superior to their school attending peers (Meighan, 1995;

Webb, 1989). Social opportunities outside the home of homeschooled children are often greater than for children attending school (Nicholls, 1997). Others are concerned by the lack of teaching qualifications of parents (Mayberry et al, 1995). But the possession of teaching qualifications does not guarantee an individual will be an effective teacher, nor does a lack of teaching qualifications automatically lead to ineffective teaching. The home is considered to be an effective learning environment (e.g. Thomas, 1996; Tizard & Hughes, 1984; Jalongo, 1990). It has been suggested that home education is effective because parents engage in an activity called "dovetailing", where they respond to cues provided by their children to support the next stage of learning as the child decides to encounter it (Wells, 1986, cited in Meighan, 1995). Meighan (1995) suggests that to date, over 30 learning styles have been catalogued and that the homeschooling families he has observed take it for granted that learning styles differ and adjust learning situations accordingly. Students in the Washington homeschool project were found to perform well academically on achievement tests. There was found to be little or no relationship between educational outcomes and parent education level, level of structure in the curriculum, contact with a certified teacher, hours of formal teaching or parent income (Wartes, 1989).

Children who have been home-educated have successfully applied to and been allowed entrance into prestigious universities (Webb, 1989). One family from the USA educated their four sons outside the school system, and the three oldest successfully applied to attend Harvard University (Beaven, 1990). In Australia, a homeschooled youth has recently gained entry to Melbourne University after completing a course designed to assist adult learners prepare for tertiary education (Herbert, 1998). Webb (1989) notes that there appeared to be no prejudice exhibited towards home-educated teenagers and adults when they attempted to obtain employment, despite the absence of the ubiquitous certificate attesting to attainment. She found that people who had been home-educated pursued a wide variety of options post-homeschooling and that these included self-employment, journalism, further education and trades.

Tizard and Hughes' (1984) study of female preschool children in the UK at home and at nursery school had as one of its aims the identification of anything distinctive about learning that took place at home which differed from the kind of learning that happened at school. They found that at home the children engaged in much more dialogue with an adult than at school, and that the children asked many more questions at home. The talk at home was found to be qualitatively different, with much lengthier dialogues happening in the home context. Tizard and Hughes suggest conversations are a powerful tool for enhancing children's understanding in a way that is closely matched to their intellectual level and interests. They found that the pace of academic learning at home was set by the children, who would also terminate the educational sessions when they became too demanding. Here we have some classic examples of exemplary educational practice. Thomas (1996) found during a week "living in" with a home educating family who had two children aged 11 and 13, that incidental conversation covered a vast array of topics and there was a great deal of it going on. The family appeared to have continued the type of learning that Tizard and Hughes found to be so effective in children's preschool years. Jeub (1994) suggests that homeschooling accomplishes many of the goals of contemporary educational philosophy. Viz., students develop at their own pace, learning is not compartmentalised but integrated, and the need for individual attention and assessment is addressed.

It is important to remember that not all learning requires teaching, learning can and does happen naturally. It can happen when the learner is alone or more often, because we live in a social milieu, it happens when we watch or listen to other people performing activities before we try them ourselves. This happens wherever people live, work and play together (Middleton & Hill, 1996). We should be taking account of the rapid pace of change, and work on recognising and facilitating learning which does not take place in a classroom. We need

to re-examine the role of schools and teachers and perhaps recognise that "the very idea of a complete preparation for life is illusory" and that given the changes during this century the "canonical position of pedagogical precept or hallowed curriculum may look like an archaic survival" (Boyd & King, 1975, pp 412-413).

Meighan (1995) reported that home-educated children who had previously attended school reported to him that they were able to be more efficient in their learning at home than when at school, in that it took them less time to get through their work. Another aspect which these children commented on was the relaxed atmosphere at home, which encouraged them to be self-managing about their learning. Beaven (1990) found families were free to organise their time and any "school work" that might be undertaken was dealt with within a couple of hours in the morning. This left the children with many hours each day to pursue other interests of their own choosing. If this is the case for many home-educating families, there are opportunities here for children to make decisions how to spend their time and thus have some control in their lives. It is possible children would derive a great deal of satisfaction from this sense of control and it would presumably impact on their perceptions of their home-education.

This study was based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and the notion that how the environment is perceived can affect people's development. Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development envisages a series of nested environments impacting and being impacted upon by the developing person. The innermost environment is the microsystem, the single immediate setting containing the developing subject, which is defined as "a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics (p. 22). Bronfenbrenner states the crux of the definition is in the term "experienced", which he related to Lewin's (1935 cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1979) idea of "life space", wherein reality not as it exists, but as it appears to a person, is what is of importance for understanding behaviour and development. Environmental events and conditions outside the microsystem can have a profound influence on behaviour and development within the microsystem and such influences have a pivotal role on defining the meaning of the immediate situation to the person experiencing it. This would include values and attitudes held by wider society, in this case about homeschooling. Investigating children's perceptions of their home-education could therefore be considered worthwhile in developmental terms. Given that attendance at a school is the norm for urban-dwelling children in Australia, those children who do not attend a school are in the minority. Van Galen (1989) suggests one of the social consequences of home-education and part of its hidden curriculum is children learn about society's limited tolerance for dissent. This leads one to question whether children who are being homeschooled feel marginalised in any way. It was of interest to the researcher how these children perceived (i) their home-education experiences, (ii) their neighbourhood relationships and (iii) institutional schooling.

What I did

Due to the lack of information on children's perceptions of homeschooling, a phenomenological approach was chosen for the study. Phenomenological research attempts to characterise how aspects of the world are perceived by people (Marton, 1988 cited in Evans & Fuller, 1998; Kvale, 1996). Semi-structured interviews with a parent (or parents) from the family, a child from the family and a series of three observations provided the framework of the study. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim for later analysis. The interviews were conducted in the home of the participant families as this was compatible with the phenomenological approach, where the world of the participants and their views is what is of importance. The semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for the questions to be adapted if necessary. As there was little available research about children's

perceptions of their home-education, it was necessary to allow scope to pursue a topic if an important issue came up. Also, because young children were being interviewed it was expected that wording would need to be adapted for individual children, depending on their life experiences and ability to articulate their answers.

The interview with the children sought to gain the children's perspective on three issues: (a) what they thought of their home-education; how they felt about it; what they said about it; what they liked most and least about it; whether or not they knew why they were being homeschooled (b) what they knew about schools and teachers and (c) what they knew about people in their neighbourhood.

The number of participants for this study was small (6 families) for the following reasons: there was a limited timeframe in which to conduct the research and the gathering of participants would possibly be difficult due to the marginalised nature of the group being researched (as previously mentioned in the introduction). Such a small scale study cannot be properly representational of a population and this study does not claim to be. It can however, give insight into the perspectives of an overlooked group in the literature and provide a basis for generating theory about factors influencing children's perceptions of homeschooling, as well as providing jumping off points for future research.

The participants were 7 children drawn from 6 families, two children were siblings. One child was sick on the day of the interview and was excluded from the data analysis because she gave to her very limited responses due to feeling unwell. It was not possible to reschedule the interview as this child was from a rural location. The children were aged from 6-9 years and came from various suburbs around Adelaide. Of the final 6 children, 3 had attended school for a short time and 3 had never attended school. Participant families were recruited through face-to-face contact at homeschooling outings and through referral from other homeschooling families.

What I found

None of the parents in the participating families had been home-educated themselves. Three of the families had friends who were home educating and this influenced them to homeschool. The families were all two-parent families in which the mother was the primary facilitator of the homeschooling program. In relation to how families pursued home-education, four of the five families undertook 2-3 hours of structured work, usually in the mornings, with the afternoons given over to semi-structured or unstructured activities. Observations revealed the children themselves often initiated the activities in the formal part of the day. The structured activities involved bookwork, either at individual desks or the kitchen table, where the children worked at school-type activities such as working from a textbook to learn about spelling, grammar, maths, geography and such topics. The unstructured activities were of the children's own choosing. One family pursued a natural learning, or an "unschooling" approach wherein all activities, both in the mornings and afternoons, were of the children's own choosing with no pressure applied for children to pursue "schoolwork". Of the four families who pursued structured activities for part of the day, two followed a self-instructional style where the children asked for help as and when they needed it. Three of the five families indicated that how they implemented home-education had changed over time, with a movement to a less formal approach, with the mother from one family indicating she had changed from an initial idea of homeschooling as being very structured to an unschooling or totally unstructured approach.

When asked to give an opinion or voice their feelings about their home-education, the children interviewed mentioned issues related to affect frequently. These comments

encompassed how the children felt about home-education and what they liked about it. When asked what they liked most about homeschooling the following responses were given:

- "You've got more time to do your own thing"
- "I like it, so that I can just finish early and be free for the day"
- "I'm with my mum all the time"
- "Well I get to be with my mum all the time"
- "Well I get to see mum more"

The children had some autonomy in their use of time and how they structured their day and this was recognised by them. For example,

- "Like yesterday I finished my school, all my personal school at 7.30 in the morning"
- "You can just learn what you want"
- "Well, it's really fun and you get to do things you want to do and you get to learn how much you want to know and what you want to know"

Three of the six children mentioned homeschooling being better than school, even though two of these children had never attended school themselves. One child, who had not attended school on a regular basis but had friends who did commented:

- "I probably say I would rather do homeschooling than go to school"

The children were aware that they spent less time on actual schoolwork than children who attended school, as evidenced by this comment:

- "You don't have to do as much work"

Three of the children described friends and other child acquaintances as being jealous of children who homeschooled. One child reported that friends had told her "You're so lucky you don't go to school" and another reported a close friend as preferring him over another boy because he was homeschooling.

When questioned about what they least liked about being home-educated three of the six children said there was nothing. One child's response was:

- "I just like everything about it, being educated at home"

Two children (both from the same family) mentioned aspects to do with the academic curriculum - in particular maths, "I don't like maths in the book" and one child also mentioned not seeing friends as often as she might if she attended school.

The children varied in their knowledge of their local neighbourhood. Two knew of another family that homeschooled in their local area, the others said their family was the only one homeschooling in the neighbourhood. Three of the children were able to give in-depth detail about the people in their street, including the number of children in a family, the expected birth date of a new baby and the comings and goings of a family across the street. Another child knew a few of the children in the local neighbourhood, while another was not at all familiar with neighbours, or neighbours' children. The three children who had a sound knowledge of their neighbourhood, indicated that they played regularly with children from the neighbourhood who attended school. One child said that many of the other people from her local area "hate us". This child was the only child who expressed a clear sense of marginalisation from the locals.

Interviews with the parents and children, and observations revealed that the wide range of activities which the children were exposed to as part of the curriculum included, but was not limited to: maths, spelling, grammar, dictation, typing, shorthand, cooking, gardening, art lessons, basketball, Irish dancing, music lessons, ice skating and weekly visits to the zoo. There was a combination of self-initiated and mother-initiated activities observed, with the children themselves often initiating formal activities. Observations of the children engaged in homeschooling activities also revealed that the children were free to talk to each other, able to select items for use in activities, stop work to attend to an interruption (phone call, ice cream van, visitor), discuss ideas and so on. Sometimes the children worked alone, sometimes with siblings and at other times with their mother. They were also able to vary the time they spent on activities and were not locked into set time periods for any activity. They spent as little as five minutes to over forty minutes on an activity. The observations further revealed the inter-related learning that was able to occur in the homeschooling situation. In all the families except one, in which there were no siblings, observations showed there were situations where children participated in learning activities with their sibling(s). Discussion amongst family members while activities were undertaken was often observed. The atmosphere was a very informal one, with household happenings, chores and discussions occurring amidst the more school-type activities.

Discussion

The fact that none of the parents had been home-educated and some of the families decided to take up homeschooling as a result of witnessing friends homeschool implies that there is a continuing growth and interest in homeschooling in Australia. It also implies that the families were learning about home-education as they did it; they did not have previous experience to draw upon. This may indicate there is a need to provide information to intending homeschoolers about children's development and ways to facilitate children's learning. The continuing growth in home-education should be of interest to state education authorities. These government agencies will need to be more cognisant than they have been of the practice of home-education, and the emerging research surrounding homeschooling if they are to cater to this growing group of children.

It is apparent from their comments that these children perceived the experience of being homeschooled as decidedly positive. While there were differences in how the families practiced homeschooling, all the children said they enjoyed being homeschooled. The children indicated that they had some autonomy in their daily lives and flexibility in the use of their time. The children were cognisant of the control they have over their learning and this appeared to be of importance to them. Observations of the homeschooling practices of the families revealed that the children engaged in a good deal of discussion during the structured activities, with their siblings and mothers. These discussions could be interpreted as a type of "conversational learning" which Thomas (1994), and Tizard and Hughes (1984) suggest supports children's learning in an effective way. There may be some link between this effective support for learning and the children's positive perceptions of home-education. They were able to initiate and terminate activities, they were able to spend as much or as little time on activities as they wanted to, or could cope with at the time. They did have the freedom to stop and start, discuss issues that came up as they worked and attend to distractions. Having the freedom to make these constant start-stop transitions may have been another aspect of the relaxed, "learn what you want to" atmosphere which these children appreciated. The autonomy the children experience over the choice and timing of activities seemed to empower them and this is probably one of the factors that contributed to their positive perceptions of their homeschooling experience. The fact that the children were motivated to initiate activities in the formal part of the day appears to point to this autonomy being practiced as a regular part of the children's lives.

Three of the children mentioned spending time with their mother as the most liked aspect of home education for them. It is to be presumed therefore that a close relationship exists between these children and their mothers. The development of closer family ties is one of the aspirations of homeschooling parents that the literature speaks of (e.g. Beaven, 1990) and apparently, children also see this as a desirable situation. Child/parent relationship may therefore be a variable that helps to shape children's perceptions of home-education. Close relationships may enhance the experience, whereas distant relationships may detract from it and make it less enjoyable.

The children, with the exception of one, did not exhibit or report a sense of marginalisation from the people in their neighbourhood, with three of the six children demonstrating a detailed knowledge of their local street and the people residing therein. The children had access to social relationships within their street with peers and had regular contact with peers who attended school, thus indicating that they were accepted by these other children as playmates. The child who had experienced some hostility from local children clearly sensed a lack of acceptance. While this did not appear to adversely affect her perception of homeschooling, it is not clear whether it made her more inclined to say she liked being homeschooled as a reaction. The acceptance or otherwise of homeschooling children locally may be another factor in forming the children's perceptions of homeschooling, but the relationship is not clear at this stage.

If as Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserted, how the environment is perceived is an important dimension of development, then it is judicious to consider how homeschooling is viewed by education authorities and wider society as this will impact on children's development. If homeschooling were viewed as an acceptable, alternative form of education to school attendance, then children would be unlikely to be made to feel marginalised or outside the norm. If however, homeschooling were viewed as unacceptable by education authorities and society in general, the children of families who choose to pursue homeschooling may feel marginalised and alienated from society. This sense of alienation would have a profound impact on these children's development. One of the children in this study clearly felt marginalised and this is an area that is in need of further research. A larger sample size would give a better indication as to whether or not such marginalisation was common for homeschooled children.

The results from this study make it possible to begin to formulate a model of factors which influence children's perceptions of their home-education experience and which could be tested through further research in this area. Of course any model must recognise the reciprocal relationship between the developing child and the environment. A child's development could be considered to be an endogenous variable affecting a child's perceptions of home-education and the other factors to be variables exogenous to the child. Exogenous variables feed into the child's development (endogenous variable) which in turn feeds back into the exogenous variables in a reciprocal relationship.

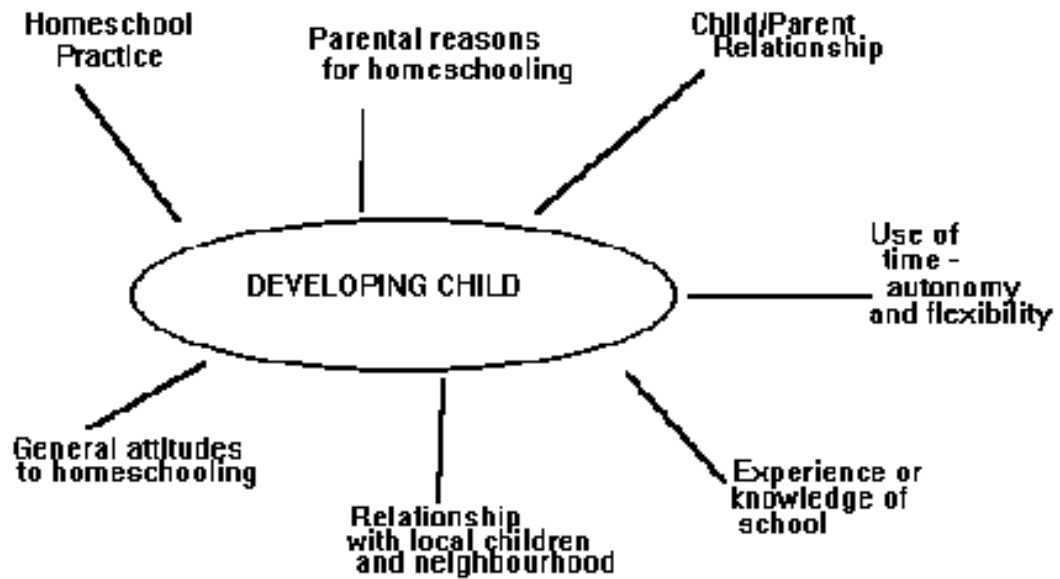


Figure 1: Model of factors affecting children's perceptions of homeschooling

This model is a beginning explanation only; there is as yet insufficient information and research on children's perceptions for it to qualify as a definitive model.

Not everyone learns best in the same mode or at the same time and in the same environment. There is a need to be flexible in curriculum and delivery and homeschooling could be a viable option for some people. We need to think outside the square. We could further allow for diversity of learning styles and situations by:

- being willing to accept that school *cannot* meet all children's needs
- developing flexible arrangements for school enrolment (ie. part-time attendance)
- accepting and tolerating a diversity of learning environments if they meet learners' needs
- utilising new technologies for learning away from school setting
- recognising that parents who choose to homeschool are committed to their children's education
- pursuing genuine partnerships between home and school
- recognising that teaching qualifications are not a prerequisite to assisting a child to learn
- allowing young people to pursue independent learning
- allowing young people to develop their own learning program
- recognising community-based learning and teaching as valuable and acceptable

The current South Australian initiative of local site management, Partnerships 21, offers an opportunity to embrace change and to look at new ways of making schools a part of the local life of a community. It could mean that homeschooling parents could be offered a position on school management boards with a view to incorporating the views of this group of parents into the ethos of the school in order to promote the most effective method of supporting the development of all children's educational lives within a given community.

If such a situation began to emerge, the role of some teachers could be changed to one where, instead of being tied to a classroom, teachers are mobile overseers of a number of children, facilitating their educational pathways rather than controlling them. The resultant decrease in stress for teachers (and perhaps children) is self-evident - freed from the daily contact of a group of children needing to be contained within a small space and programmed for on a daily basis, a teacher's role would move to that of an educational guide. The responsibility for progress would then also be shifted to the learner - where it rightfully should rest.

This study has provided initial evidence of the positive perceptions about their education of children who are homeschooled and as such has implications for educational authorities, educational legislation and even educational institutions. If children are enjoying the experience and achieving successful outcomes (see Meighan, 1995), then it would be unwise to ignore the phenomenon and unhelpful not to facilitate its better and fuller acceptance and implementation for those who wish to pursue it as an alternative to institutional schooling.

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