

# Home Education in the Australian Context

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**Abstract**—This paper will seek to clarify important key terms such as home schooling and home education as well as the legalities attached to such terms. It will reflect on the recent proposed changes to terminology in NSW, Australia. The various pedagogical approaches to home education will be explored including their prominence in the Australian context. There is a strong focus on literature from Australia. The historical background of home education in Australia will be explained as well as the difference between distance education and home education. The future of home education in Australia will be discussed.

**Keywords**—Alternative education, e-learning, home education, home schooling, online resources, technology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

HOME schooling or home education is seen as the education of the child in the home context, an alternative to school attendance, where parents assume primary responsibility for the education of their children [27]. This alternative to conventional school based education consists of various educational and philosophical approaches. Under the Government of New South Wales (NSW) Education Act 1990, the parent of a child of compulsory school-age, being 6 years old in Australia, has a duty to ensure that the child is enrolled in one of the following four options, either: i) government school, ii) registered non-government school, iii) distance education or, iv) home school. It is a condition that the child that is registered for home schooling receive instruction in accordance with the policies of registration for home schooling [15]. In home education, ability-based development is valued above prearranged stages and grades, which allows for individual tailoring of educational programs across individual content areas, based on a student's capabilities.

This paper will review the literature on home education. There will be a strong focus on literature from Australia, as it relates to the context of the researcher. It needs to be acknowledged, however, there is a large amount of research from the United States (US) that cannot be disregarded, and thus some US research will be incorporated. The use of US research is also due to the limited amount of research available in the Australian context, relating specifically to the topic of home education. The historical background of home education in Australia will be outlined first, then the difference between distance education and home education. The paper will then describe the various pedagogical approaches to home education will be explored including their prominence in the Australian context. The statistics related to home education in Australia will be explored in the scope and compared to the

US. The paper will finish by linking to technologies and online resources.

## II. DEFINITIONS AND HISTORY

### A. Definitions

Although home education is recognized and implemented in all Australian states and territories, only 3 states, New South Wales (NSW), the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Queensland (QLD) afford a legalized definition. In New South Wales and Victoria, the term 'home schooling' is used with most other states and territories employing the term 'home education' in their regulation and policy. The Education Act 1990 uses the term 'home schooling.' The term 'home education' has been debatable for many years as there are characteristic contradictions in the name and definition. It is mostly due to learning not necessarily being limited to the physical home environment, and usually the educational approaches are different to a school like setting. Barr et-Peacock [5] notes the Education Act 1990 definition of home education is seriously flawed and it does not reflect the reality of the practice. Recently, the NSW inquiry into home schooling made a recommendation regarding the specific term to be used when referring to home education [32]. The select committee finalized the review in November 2014 and recommended that the term home schooling in NSW should be officially referred to as non-institution based education. The committee recommended that the Education Act 1990 be amended to ensure the term home schooling be referred to as non-institution based education [31]. For the purpose of this paper, the term 'home education' will be used to ensure familiarity and international alignment.

### B. Historical Background

Home educating in its essence was the first official type of education for children around the world. In previous centuries, the wealthy did not send their children away to be educated but would employ a governess. The less wealthy would be forced to provide some type of education for their children in the home context.

Prior to the nineteenth century, specifically in the American context, it was the family's responsibility to educate their children, and most were educated by parents or tutors at home [25]. Thus, the idea of home education is not a foreign concept in the general compass of history. In the Australian context, due to colonial history, the majority of first families concentrated on the building of the nation through practical and resourceful skills essential for survival, rather than literate education. As the colony of Australia grew, so did the opportunity for literate education. Most first schools were church run, and this remained the case until the 1900's, when

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formal government run schools were established in Australia.

As the 'free' education movement in Australia grew, specifically the government owned school system, parents were happy to hand over responsibility to the schools, relinquishing their responsibility to educate their child to an external provider. It was not until the early 1970's that the conflicts between schools and alternative education peaked. In the early 1980's, government departments started to identify the need for policies to be implemented to allow for the education of children at home [11]. Since this time, the home education community has identified various flaws in departmental policy, the essence being the over regulation of home education. This is still the case today. The recent change in the information package for NSW home educators, with minimal consultation caused ubiquitous outrage among the home education community. A 10,000-signature petition was submitted to parliament in May 2014. This sparked an extensive inquiry into home educating, the inquiry receiving over 270 submissions from various organizations, academics and concerned citizens. The committee hearing finalized recommendations in November 2014 with 24 recommendations listed. These recommendations varied from regulatory changes to future engagement with stakeholders. It can be seen that the mobilization of home school organizations in Australia has become quite strong over the years. This is greatly due to increased ease of connection and collaboration via online means. Hanna [17] in her rare ten-year longitudinal study on home educators analyzed the increase in networking by home educating families. Her studies not only find an exponential increase in networking but the use of the internet for locating resources and activities. The online communication has made it easier for parents and their home-educated children to 'connect' with the outside world and have access to a multitude of resources.

Even though home education is the longest-standing educational approach, it closely reflects the ambitions for 21st century learning structures. The emphasis of progression by achievement rather than age and the commitment to lifelong learning reflect the continual relevance. Home education leads the guarantee of the implementation of learning through real life problems, development of critical thinking and the use of online tools to continue this progression [20]. With the increase of an online presence, the connection of the home school community will continue to grow.

### III. HOME EDUCATION AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Both current literature within Australia [13], [24] and the NSW governing body regard home education as different to distance education. However, there are researchers, mainly from Queensland who have included distance education as a category of home education in their research [22]. Terrence Harding, who in his unpublished thesis identified home education and distance education as being the same, Harding [18] looked into parents' conceptions as their role of home educators of their children, thus included parents of distance-educated children in his study. Upon further research, it may have been due to personal links with non-government

distance-education schools and the perception that, like home education, distance education is formally classified to occur in the home [31]. However, the majority of literature states there is a difference. In distance education, the school and virtual teacher are responsible for 'developing, implementing and evaluating student learning programs. A parent or other supervisor supports the child to complete the learning programs which developed by the school' [10]. In contrast, home education parents seek to develop or outsource their own teaching and learning programs best suited for their children. In the home education context, parents are ultimately responsible for the dissemination and implementation of an educational program.

The enrolment of students into distance education is not automatic. Students need to fit into certain categories in order to qualify for distance education. Categories for enrolment include students, who are geographically isolated, travelling within Australia and overseas for extended periods. A medical condition preventing the child from attending school, are pregnant or are a school-aged parent, are vocationally talented, for example, employed in the entertainment industry, are elite sports people or in performing arts and students who have additional learning and support needs, in cases where there is no local provision to meet these needs [10]. Distance education is based on the provision of 'school-like' content. This is in stark contrast to home education, where parents make a choice to home educate, seek permission from the regulation authority (BOS in NSW) and adopt an educational approach of choice. The reason to home educate is not probed and need only be optionally disclosed on the application form [6].

Distance education includes policies administered the same way as all government schools, which means the child is formally enrolled at a school. This also includes accountability for satisfactory attendance, however generally not in the physical sense. The attendance is monitored by a register of interactions both virtual and face-to-face [30].

About the requirement for teaching qualifications, BOSTES notes that for distance education, teachers must have the required teaching accreditation. By contrast, parents who home school their children are not required to have formal teacher training or teacher experience. Instead, the capacity of a home educating parent to plan and provide for the child's educational needs is assessed by an authorized person employed by BOSTES [9] an authorized person from BOSTES assesses applications based on specific program and environmental factors and provides recommendations to the Minister for Education.

One other difference between home education and distance education is access to the Higher School Certificate. Both school and distance education enable students to complete the prescribed study, assessments and examinations for the HSC award, whereas generally, it is not accessible for home-educated students. There are occurrences where home-educated adolescents access the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) run by the NSW Technical and Further Education (TAFE). The HSC can be completed in an online,

adult learning environment. Another difference is that home education does not receive any government funding, while distance education is still under the school funding umbrella. Interestingly, home-educated students save the government millions of dollars per year. In NSW, Government schools receive nearly \$16,000 per student in funding, and private schools nearly \$8,500. Thus, when a parent chooses to home school their child, they are effectively saving the government \$16,000 per year. The home school community continues to argue about the lack of redirection of these funds for support services or alternative resource allocation [20].

Two similar features of home educating and distance education, although minor, are that parents supervise student learning and parents provide a 'learning space' at home for the student to work. One common thread linking all forms of education whether school, distance education or home school, as stated in the Education Act 1990 is the proviso that the NSW syllabus be implemented [14].

#### IV. PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

Home education is not a singular movement [16], [37]. Within the home education context, there are a range of attitudes and practices that make up the community. 'Home schoolers' attribute their educational practices to an array of religious, epistemic, and sociopolitical theories. What unifies home schoolers is a decision to forgo the conventional school experience and instead become more directly involved in their child's learning' [31]. Home educators identify with various pedagogical approaches. An approach is seen as the implementation of learning based on the preferred style or method.

Home education contains a myriad of approaches and theories. The home education experience is unique for each family and the diverse approaches reflect this [36]. Parents may choose to trial different approaches at different times in their child's education, or may use more than one approach at a time. Home educating families tend to start with a structured school like context but move to a more informal approach as they gain experience and confidence in home education. Jackson [22] states that 'it is unusual for families to maintain a strict and structured school approach throughout their home educating experience, particularly in long-term home education families' (p.8). This sentiment is echoed by other researchers in the field [26], [37] and demonstrates the often failed assiduous attempt of parents to replicate school at home, with parents often falling back into less structured approaches. Louis [27] found that this shift in pedagogies was due to the burden of responsibilities that parents felt when first starting home school and the trial of simpler, streamlined approaches helped avoid burnout. The range of approaches reflects this process. Each home-educated family is unique, thus the approach used may be a case of discovery until the best 'fit' is realized.

Home educators cannot be standardized under one type of approach, as there may be a number of educational approaches being implemented interchangeably within the home context [21]. However, the home education community does identify

with three main home education approaches including them under the umbrella of structured learning environments, informal methods of education, to a more unstructured environment often referred to as unschooling. Allan and Jackson [3] expand on the categories of approaches and identify six different home education approaches most commonly used in Australia. They include:

- 1) The structured approach otherwise known as 'school at home' includes school-like timetabling and prescribed use of text books, including analogous lesson planning, record keeping and subject allocation. Essentially, the structured approach attempts to replicate the school environment in the home context.
- 2) Unit studies take on a similar process to integrated studies. Unit studies focus on a particular interest of the child and use the topic in most Key Learning Areas (KLA's). KLA's are used to identify the subject areas in NSW. For primary aged children, there are 6 KLA's which include English, Mathematics, Science and Technology, Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE) (incorporating History K-6 from 2015), Creative Arts (CAPA) and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE). An example of a unit study could be a topic focus on Rainforests, writing about rainforests in English, calculating the distance to rainforests, or the height of trees in mathematics, learning about the history and geography of rainforests and drawing, painting or creating models of rainforests in CAPA.
- 3) The classical approach includes a 'three part process of training the mind, with grammar, logic and rhetoric taught as tools to use to master every other subject [3]. With this type of approach, the early years of education, called the 'grammar stage' are spent absorbing facts. During this stage, children spend a copious amount of time on memory and drill work. The middle grades are which students learn to think through arguments, called the 'logic stage.' This second phase allows the facts previously learnt to be placed into logical frameworks and the relationships with different concepts and ideas are examined. The third phase is referred to as the 'rhetoric stage,' taught in the higher years; where students learn more about how to express themselves. The classical approach is centered around language, explicitly speaking and writing, rather than through images, visuals or multimedia.
- 4) Charlotte Mason, a British educator theorizes that children best learn by teaching basic reading, writing and mathematics skills and to then allow children the access other subjects using the best sources of knowledge. The 'other' subjects provide opportunity for play and exploration as well as site specific visits to museums and art galleries. These real-life experiences are encouraged throughout the learning process and include access to 'living ideas' books [3]. These books contain facts through storytelling, reinforcing the belief that good

literature should be the basis of most lessons, to foster children's relationship and knowledge of God.

- 5) Unschooling or natural learning is a process by which children learn through real life experiences. There are no rigid set criteria and children are left to explore their own interests, facilitated by adults. This style of home education is often associated with 'radical' unschoolers who practice other forms of child-led parenting such as providing children the choice regarding all facets of life including bed times, food consumption and the use of television and other technology [15].
- 6) Eclectic home education is an approach that combines a few other approaches. It is seen as a type of 'blended learning' sometimes-incorporating more than one approach or including part time school, distance education or e learning. Herbert [19] explains the eclectic method as a conceptual approach that does not hold rigidly to a single paradigm or set of assumptions about home educating, but instead draws upon multiple theories, styles, or ideas to gain complementary insights into a subject, or applies different theories in particular cases. The eclectic home educator may choose to send their child to school part time, or base some learning around educational resources. The eclectic method may choose to incorporate a combination of approaches that works best for the child and family.

The Home Education Association (HEA) submitted results of a survey to the NSW inquiry into home schooling in 2014. HEA undertook a survey in to the approaches used with 236 home educators, 175 of which were from New South Wales. Natural and unschooling approaches were differentiated and dominated, together with eclectic learning styles. The classical and school at home were the least popular approaches. The unit studies approach was not incorporated into the survey responses.

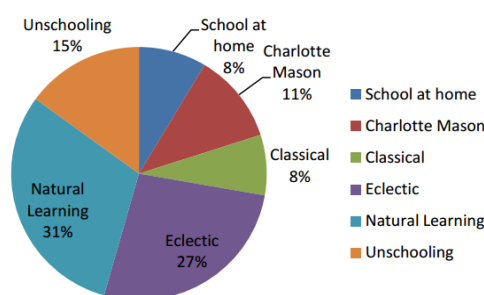


Fig. 1 Pedagogical Approaches Used in Home Education [20]

Other approaches that home educators use include Montessori and Steiner-Waldorf forms of education that are often found being implemented in specific government registered schools.

Experiential learning often referred to as hack schooling is regularly used by travelling families. This includes activities such as developing a micro-business, commissioning work experience or volunteering on community projects in each place of residence for a short time [20].

The rise of access to online resources has made all the above approaches more accessible than ever. Parents are now able to research different approaches and gather resources that best suit their child's learning. This study will aim to demonstrate the extent of the use of online resources; how it is affecting home educating families and what could be done to improve access.

#### V.SCOPE OF HOME EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

Home education, as an alternative to school based education is growing at a rapid pace both in NSW, across Australia and around the world. In Australia, the number of home educating families continues to rise. Official figures from the BOS [7] have the number of registered home-educated children across Australia at 11,000. However, the real number could be much higher, approximately 50,000 across Australia [1]. This discrepancy in figures is due to the non-registration of some home educating families and their desire to be excluded from any government regulation. Parents' resistance to any form of registration or approval and monitoring processes by state governments is due to a number of factors. Often, parents do not want to follow the state prescribed curriculum, believing that the state should not dictate what their children should and should not learn. Parents not registered with state governments may resent intrusion into their lives [25]. For most families, the choice not to be registered under the state jurisdiction is due to philosophical objection or practical difficulties with the current regulatory regime rather than an objection to providing children with a high quality education. Registration, or non-registration does not equate to poor education, there is no correlation with the two [23]. Under educated children can be enrolled in school system in the same way well educated children exist outside the state regulatory registration system. Registration and education are demonstrably separate and distinct.

Most data and statistics presented focus on NSW, with limited discussion on the national and international scale.

In NSW the official figure for home educated children currently stands at 3,238, as of December 2013 [8]. This number has grown steadily over the past five years [8]. Since 2008/2009, the number of children with registration in NSW increased 67%, the number of families increasing 69% in the same period. The age of children registered for home education in NSW averages at approximately 300 per age group [29].

The demographic of families that home educate include the overwhelming majority of single child families. BOSTES reported that as at December 2013, 55 per cent of home educating families had a single child registered for home education. However, through personal experience I have not seen this to be the case. The HEA [20] state that home educators appear to have a larger number of children than average. However, this is mentioned as being anecdotal and not possible to verify.

It is important to note that these statistics rely on data collected by BOSTES and do not represent the true number of home educators in the state due to parent's decision to not

register, as previously mentioned [28].

Most home educating families rely on the mother as the educator. However, some parents do share the role and a very small number of fathers take on the primary role of educator. There are no official numbers; however, there are very few single parent families home educating. Education levels of parents vary from year 10 to tertiary qualifications [3]. A UK study concerning home educating parents' level of education demonstrates the varied qualifications home educating parents hold. Rothermel's [35] study found that approximately 47 per cent of home educating parents had attended university. Of this, 13.5 per cent were schoolteachers or lecturers, and about 41 per cent said that at least, one parent was teacher trained. In the Australian context, [32] estimated that in her home education support group, about 20 per cent of members were schoolteachers before they decided to home educate. The HEA [20] said that previous research has showed that between 8 and 26 per cent of Australian home educating parents have teaching qualifications. The majorities of home educating parents do not hold formal teaching qualifications, but do believe they can provide the best education for their child.

From the 2012/13 year, the number of home-educated students across Australia increased 13%, a pace that is above current data of an expected growth rate of 5% to 8% per annum. With an overall 13% official increase in numbers from 2012 to 2013, it is clear that home education continues to be a viable alternative to mainstream education in Australia. The increase in home education each year is thought to be due to a number of reasons. This includes a possible rise in the incidence of school bullying to the accessibility provided by the increased access to technology and to various resources, learning materials and the wider home education community via social media [13]. Additionally, the availability of technology and online resources has made home education a viable option for many families. Hanna [17], in the 10 year longitudinal study, found that the lives of home educators was profoundly affected by the dramatic spike in reliance on the internet for curriculum probing as well as social networking. The internet has revolutionized the world of home education as well as education as a whole.

## VI. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA SCOPE

Compared to the United States of America, Australia's home education population is extremely small. There are approximately 2.2 million home-educated students in the United States of America. There were an estimated 1.73 to 2.35 million children home educated during the spring of 2010 in the United States [33]. It appears the home education population is continuing to grow (at an estimated 2% to 8% per annum over the past few years). It is important to state that these statistics include the non-registered home-educated families. Ray [34] mentions the 'underground' home educating families as those not willing to comply with state registration laws. The statistics account for 10% of families as being 'underground.' Ray [34] explains that this 10% figure is conservative. Approximately 3 percent of the school-age populations were home educated in the 2011–12 school years

in the USA. In comparison, only 0.3% of Australia children are home educated. However, this percentage is calculated using the official number of registered home educators nationally, being 11,000 as previously mentioned. The official number of students in Australia is 3,694,101. The US calculation allowed 10% for variation due to non-registered home educators. When applying this in the Australian context the percentage of home education population (0.33%) is still minute in comparison to the US [37].

In view of research on home education, it is important to note that most of the research has been conducted in the USA and is usually not transferable to the Australian context. The development of home education in the two contexts is different as is the community makeup. The USA has a significant conservative fundamental Christian community, from which a large proportion of the home education community in the USA is drawn. Collom [12] describes the rise of Christian fundamentalist educators in the 1980s who opposed the secularization of schooling. Australia does not associate with such a distinct and sizable fundamentalist type community. The context in the USA is usually to distrust any government involvement in common freedoms and rights. This is significantly different from the Australian context [20].

In addition, Australia provides government funding for independent schools, including faith based schools. This enables parents to have a choice to send their child to a school affiliated with a particular religion or educational philosophy. Specifically, access to Christian schools become easier and provides an affordable means of education for families with strong religious beliefs. Although there remain some families who choose to home educate for faith-based reasons, this community is neither as large, nor as conservative as in the USA. For these reasons, it is problematic to apply home education research undertaken in the American context to the Australian context. It would be counterproductive to try to address American issues in Australian legislation or policy unless there was strong evidence that these issues also faced Australian home educating families [20]. In addition, the USA has large cyber or virtual charter school movements, that are essentially online public schools, funded by the government, run by private organizations. The districts work with private organizations by providing funding for each enrolled child. These charter schools are established by groups of individuals who have agreed to provide educational experiences, which replace the traditional classroom environment, connecting home educating families via the Internet [4].

## VII. THE USE OF ONLINE RESOURCES IN EDUCATION

The use of online resources via technology is a necessary skill in the real world context. Home-educated students must have appropriate technology skills to transfer to work and higher education settings. Compiling online resources to facilitate learning and creating application connections has the potential to improve home education, better preparing students for transition to other educational and workplace settings. The reality is that the use of technology is needed in every step of application, synthesis and transfer of skills and knowledge in

today's society.

Research on technology and its impact on home education have been conducted. However, technology in the studies focused on the use of physical equipment such as TV's, personal computers, mobile phones and iPads.

In both the American and Australian context, there have not been many studies focused on the use of online resources by home educating families. A single study out of Malaysia addressed the use of technology-based activities and created the seven elements of technology. However, the study used the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) Approach, usually reserved for business and engineering research [2]. The model was created by consensus of the researchers and no outside participants were included in the study. The limitations of this study are apparent, as the home educating community was not consulted upon development of the framework.

The influence technology has, and will continue to have on home education, as well as the need for research in this area. Although there is little research on how technology affects home educators, there is evidence that home educating parents use technology, in different ways for different uses. The importance and relevance of my proposed study is evident in the current educational climate. Every day, more resources and programs are becoming accessible to the home educator.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

The home education landscape in Australia is changing. The continual rise of registered home educators supports this. However, so is education, as we know it today? The use of online resources to facilitate learning is a major part of education today, whether in primary school or university. The proliferation of online resources can sometimes feel overwhelming for home educators. No longer are parents struggling to find resources, rather the opposite has happened, having access to thousands of options and programs and trying to choose the best options to help educate their child. My interest lies in what parents are actually using, how they incorporate online resources into the curriculum, how they find out about such resources and what can be done to improve access to online resources.

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