Rebecca English
and Gemma Troughton

CANARIES IN THE COALMINE

Australian Teachers Who Homeschool Their Children

Education Studies

Collection Editor
JANISE HURTIG

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Abstract

While the number of homeschoolers among all demographics, in Australia and elsewhere, is growing, it is homeschooling teachers who represent the biggest change. Teachers have a unique relationship with schools and represent a marked shift in attitudes to school, as canaries in the coalmine. This book examines the reasons teachers choose to homeschool their children. It was in the individual stories of our participant teachers that a story of schools' failure to meet students' needs was found. This book challenges anyone interested in the future of education to consider the role of homeschooling in changing education for the twenty-first century.

Key words

analogous, canaries, curriculum, home education, home schooling, pull, push, school choice, stories

Warning

This book contains explicit references to and descriptions of situations which may cause distress. This includes references to and descriptions of:

- Suicidal thoughts, intentions, and actions
- School refusal
- Bullying and assault
- Ableism, discrimination, and micro-aggressions

Every effort has been made to provide more specific content warnings before relevant chapters, but please be aware that references to potentially distressing topics occur **frequently** and **throughout** the book.

Contents

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Turrbal and Yugara people as the First Nations owners of the lands where this book was written. We pay respect to their Elders, lores, customs and creation spirits. We recognise that these lands have always been places of teaching, of research and of learning. We acknowledge the important role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play within the Australian homeschooling community.

This book began as an observation, "Why are there so many teachers turning up at our homeschool groups? In Facebook groups? In homeschooling spaces?"We were particularly attuned to it as teachers ourselves living, working and home educating in Australia. What is going on in their world where teachers are pulling themselves and their children from the traditional mainstream system and choosing homeschooling as a viable option? Are these people early warning indicators of something deeper happening within the education system? In this book, we examine the reasons teachers choose homeschooling for their own children, and we also reflect on our own experiences. We consider how our own experiences of school refusal, of trauma in school, and school distress reflect and mirror the experiences of many Australian families. Our data suggests our experiences were not unique.

We acknowledge and thank the participants who gave up their time to tell us their stories. We also thank the faculty of Creative

Industries, Education and Social Justice (CIESJ) at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the Community of Australian Deans of Research in Education (cADRE) for providing us with some funding and for taking a chance on a story that challenges normative schooling and asks readers to think more deeply about the role of schooling in educating the community in the twenty-first century. We also acknowledge our families who support us in this homeschooling journey and the writing process. Finally, a cuddly thank you to our pets, the miniature dachshund Peggy Peaches and schnauzer Florian, who keep us, and our children, sane.

This book reveals the fissures at the heart of modern schooling. The wheels are falling off the bus, but nobody seems to want to admit that because of the role of schools in providing a basic education, and some childcare, for young people in a community who need both parents to work to try to keep afloat in a cost-of-living crisis. These families' choices challenge dominant narratives about schooling, and their stories are even more powerful because they are teachers.

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1
What is homeschooling anyway?

Learning objectives

1. Identify three reasons why parents might choose home-schooling and consider how they might be affected by experience in a classroom.
2. Reflect critically on what aspects of the classroom culture and environment may impact the choice to homeschool.
3. Critically examine your own experiences with students with additional needs in your classes. How would this student be affected by their parents' choice to homeschool?
4. Consider the notion of analogous education. How might it explain the choice of homeschooling?

Introduction

This book is about teachers who are parents and choose to homeschool from an Australian perspective, as both authors live, work, and home educate in Australia. While there is a lot of research in the USA, in Australia, in the UK, in New Zealand,

in Canada, and in other places homeschooling is legal (parts of Europe, parts of Asia) focused on the choice of homeschooling, questions around who does it and why, the philosophy behind it (the spectrum from unschooling to school at home) and the outcomes (particularly in the USA, questions around where homeschoolers go when they "finish" or "graduate"), there is not much on parents who homeschool. Beyond that question, we are interested in parents who are also qualified and/or experienced teachers, whatever that qualification and experience might be. There is no research on how teachers who choose to homeschool, and anecdotal and even government data in certain judications (Queensland Government: Department of Education, 2023) suggest this group is growing, come to the choice of homeschooling and how they experience the choice of homeschooling with their children. In this book, we look at the ways teacher-parents who homeschool talk about that experience. We are interested in four key questions:

1. What do teachers who homeschool bring to their experience of homeschooling?
2. Why might teachers who homeschool choose a particular style that is aligned with their teaching training?
3. Our experiences of teaching and our reflexive practice changed as a result of our experiences of homeschooling. To what extent does that change reflect the experiences of other homeschooling teachers?
4. What do their decisions to leave the education system tell us about what is happening with the current mainstream system?

These four key questions lead to the need to define some important concepts:

1. What does it mean to homeschool?
2. How do we categorise homeschool?
3. What styles of homeschooling are there?
4. Is homeschooling part of mainstream education, or is it in the shadows?
5. Analogous education.

In what follows in this chapter, we address these key points. These points allow us to explore the experiences of teachers who homeschool and how they approach their children's experiences of learning.

What is homeschooling?

Homeschooling is defined as the education of the child outside of a formal institution like a school (English & Gribble, 2021). Unlike with other forms of education, such as distance education and part-time school, homeschooling parents are wholly responsible for the education of their children, and that education is independent of teachers. While they may utilise other forms of education as part of their homeschooling journey (including private tutoring, music education, sports), the parents curate the whole educational experience, and implement most of the educational experiences that are required to provide that child with a well-rounded education.

We use the term "homeschooling" here in this book; however, we acknowledge that the term is problematic. One of the problems with the term is that most registering bodies, in Australia

(Queensland Government: Department of Education, 2023) and around the world (Lees & Nicholson, 2021), prefer the term home education. Home education is preferred because it conveys more of the nuance of the approach. We can also include the many varied types of education that happen in a homeschool setting, with minimal correlation to the traditional idea of the term "school." As we discuss below, there are many alignments between other educational movements. For our purposes, we frame the discussion in relation to shadow education but suggest a new term to categorise it as analogous education, and homeschooling. However, we are using the term "homeschooling" because of its relationship to popular notions of what a home educator is and does, where the child receives their "schooling" and "education." We use the term "school" in its older iteration, meaning "to learn;" interestingly, its original meaning was from the Greek and means "leisure." The word also has links to multitude, which, in relation to the growth of the movement, is our little joke on the term.

The link to the Greek term, "scholē," or leisure, is important in this context. Schooling, the school years, are a time when children should be given the opportunity to figure out what they are interested in, what they want to know and who they want to be. It is a time that should be a distance from economic necessity (Bourdieu, 1984) that will facilitate that discovery. However, as many researchers have noted (Luthar et al., 2020), schooling has become less and less "leisurely" over the past 30 years. With the rise in competitive schooling (Jabbar et al., 2022), competition is as much between schools as it has been between individuals enrolled in schools (Luthar et al., 2020). Along with this competition has been an increased focus on testing (Au, 2022), and

this testing emphasis has led to a decreased emphasis on experimentation (Rutkowski, 2001), on learning in innovative ways (Kavanagh & Fisher-Ari, 2020) and has seen the curriculum shrink (Yandall, Doecke & Abdi, 2020). As two of our parents, Madeline and Cathy, said in their interviews, as well as Gemma noted in her discussion, which we will come to. For example, Madeline and Cathy both bemoaned the emphasis on academics and, in particular, Maths and Sciences, without any focus on the Arts and other subjects that their children really loved and enjoyed. There is some evidence, in our data as well as in the authors' own stories, that children who prefer to work in a creative way, and are looking for the space to draw, to paint, to sculpt and to read, are more likely to find the focus on Maths and Sciences stifling and preferred the opportunity to offer more creativity in their homeschooling settings (see also Fisher, 2023).

With this shrinking of curriculum, there has been a reduction in subjects that are not "valued," such as the Arts (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011), and even English language instruction has changed (Menken, 2008). Madeline talked about this problem in her interview. There is a distinct shift in schools and classrooms with more emphasis on subjects that have fewer creative outlets and subjects that rely on strong underlying language and number skills. Kettler et al. (2018) suggest there are benefits to creativity in the classroom, such as problem-solving skills in both the educational and personal setting. Robinson (2006) stated that creativity was as important in education as literacy, and that failure to teach the creative subjects was just as detrimental as not teaching maths and sciences. Gemma's story suggests many homeschoolers would agree.

There has also been a view that teachers are suddenly required to "parent" (Bleazby, 2011), with research (Drane, Vernon & O'Shea, 2020) suggesting young people require more time to learn skills and attitudes that were previously taught in the home. As such, there is a lot of pressure on schools to do more (Bleazby, 2011) with less (Bleazby, 2011), and parents are increasingly unhappy with the offering of their local schools (Wenham, Dinn & Eaves, 2021). School satisfaction, among parents (Hamlin & Cheng, 2020) and teachers (Smith & Holloway, 2020), has been decreasing. Violet talked about how that conundrum affected her as a teacher and how it influenced her choice to homeschool. Nobody seems to be particularly satisfied with the services offered by schools.

To explore the issue of dissatisfaction with schooling, we will start by telling our own stories of being teachers who homeschool our own children.

Rebecca's story

I am a homeschooling mum, my children have never been to school, they just flatly refused to go. And, by "wouldn't go" I mean, absolutely, flatly, feet-stomping, crying uncontrollably refused. My oldest child has refused school from the beginning and was the most vocal about not wanting to go, probably because it was she who would have been the first to go, and she was the one I invested the most time trying to convince to go to school. We visited so many schools in my quest to get her to go. Most of them were alternative schools; there was a one-teacher school, a community school, a Montessori school and a Steiner school. Nope, nope, nope and nope. I'm now at the end of the journey with her; she's almost at the age where she can get herself ready to go to university and work out a pathway into

university. We are registered, as it is the law, and we've (so far) been really lucky with the registration process; I've never had one rejected. I think that's because I'm a teacher. The benefit of being a teacher who homeschools is in (1) the capacity to speak "department" in planning documents, (2) the capacity to speak "department" in reporting and (3) the capacity to see how to get into university. I have the added benefit of being a teacher educator, so my knowledge of university pathways is greater than that of many teachers.

To report, I use the proforma the department provides because I just want the process to be easy and to try to do what I can to ensure my child is able to keep homeschooling. There is a real fear in the community, which we saw during the review in Queensland that happened in 2024, and I share that fear of being refused homeschooling, even though it is my legal right as a parent to choose to homeschool any of my children.

My oldest child is the one I'll talk about. It's her experiences I'd like to explore here. I register properly and legally, and I feel that speaking of "department" in planning documents helps to make sure registration requirements are easy to meet. For example, I've always used references to literature to show how my child learns. Similarly, in the planning, I use teacher scripts to demonstrate to the department that there is an alignment between what they understand education (synonymous with school) to look like and the education my child has experienced for reporting purposes and will experience in the next year of homeschooling. I rely heavily on school language to produce the report. I have always used the codes in the curriculum, called content descriptors, to show the learning that should be achieved in the year level in the three areas of the report, English/Maths/another area of the curriculum.

The approach I have always taken is very teacherly, if more eclectic and less school-like than my experience of education as a teacher in a traditional setting. For example, while I do use workbooks, and my daughter does music examinations set by the Education Department, we only do an hour a day, and it's my child's choice when we do the work and if she proposes another way to cover content, we can do that. I have much more freedom than I would in a school where the curriculum would force my hand. My daughter talks with her friends about schooling, what they do, how they learn, what they're learning and so on, and I see it's much more casual and relaxed, more driven by her (if not in content but in time and approach) than her friends get in their schools with their teachers. Especially now that she's high school age, the kids she hangs out with, the ones who do go to school, have a completely different experience of being directed, not allowed to self-direct, than she does. And, they have to do subjects they either report hating or report finding really useless, and they often say their experiences are uninspiring and pointless. We don't have that experience.

Why do I approach homeschooling in a more "teacherly" fashion than if I want my child to have a self-directed experience? I do it because I want the reports to pass, so, by using the language of syllabuses and curriculum documents, I am desperately trying to convey to the regulator that this child is receiving a high-quality education, because I have used the curriculum documents which the department uses in their schools. I write feedback in a conversational style that would be recognisable to teachers who have engaged in moderation meetings and verification of samples in schools, and, through this approach, I hope to again convey that I am doing the school work the department prefers when they come to determine if the registration and reporting requirements have been met.

Homeschooling is a choice that my child has made. She has many friends, and all her cousins, who attend school. She has said to me in no uncertain terms that there is no way she wants to ever set foot in a school as a school student; she simply does not want to go. However, if she asked to go to school, I would send her.

For me, there are also influences and experiences in schools that I do not want her to have. For example, an aunt relayed how, in a very nice suburban school, my nephew was shown pornography on a phone that the school hadn't "taken away," and this had happened at lunchtime in the playground. My nephew was eight at the time.

As it stands, my homeschooling journey is almost at an end. She will go to a training college soon and do some study there with a view to developing a portfolio of learning that demonstrates her ability to go to university. She will be able to get a tertiary entrance score, called an ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank), through this process and get into university like a schooled student who will have an ATAR from their school learning. She also completes music exams, which not only shows learning, but also contributes to university entrance as it allows her to get to a level that will improve her ATAR. My child has made it very clear she wants to go to university and have a professional career.

I consider myself an "accidental" homeschooler, and I have an eclectic style. While I have never sent my child to school, I did not intend to homeschool. It's the choice that my child has made, not me.

Rebecca's story introduces two homeschooling categories, the accidentals and the deliberates. Far from reflecting the experiences in other countries, the focus on the child (rather than religious adherence or ideology) and the experiences in school are

likely to drive homeschool choice in Australia. The decision to homeschool is found to largely be driven by parents' perceptions of schools (as not working properly), and the child's lack of "fit" with the school, rather than in the US, for instance, where categories are much more likely to reflect parents' beliefs (see Van Galen, 1991). She's described herself as an "accidental" homeschooler and an "eclectic." In what follows, those terms are explained.

How to categorise homeschooling

There are several layers to categorising homeschooling, which we will discuss. We'll start with why people choose it, the accidentals of our author's story. Then, we'll talk about whether it's part of the shadow education movement. Shadow education is often associated with tutoring and is heavily relied on in Australia to solve education issues. It was even funded by the Victorian Department of Education in the wake of the pandemic to help get students up to grade level. Interestingly, the Queensland Department of Education's own publications tend to describe homeschooling as shadow education, in spite of it not being private tutoring (or private tutoring lite). Shadow education is used to refer to supplementary services that support, not replace, school. It may be that calling homeschooling supplemental education is a way to say it's not important or worthwhile or equivalent to schooling. We challenge that notion in the section that follows our discussion of supplemental education.

Accidentals versus deliberates

English (2021a; 2021b, 2023), in her work on Australian homeschoolers, has asserted that the majority of homeschoolers in

Australia are "accidental," meaning that they did not intend to choose homeschooling and are choosing it as either a last resort or to heal the child with significant school trauma.

There has been much critical work in relation to the choice of homeschooling. Much of this critical conversation looks at cultural and social differences. For example, Lowden (1993) argued that the Christian fundamentalism element evident in early literature was inappropriate to the UK context. Due to the demographics of Australia's population, it is likely that this will not apply in this country either due to declining religiosity (Hughes, 2010). Similarly, Stevens (2001) described the two groups as focusing on earth, "earth-based," and heaven, "heaven-based." Rothermel (2003) has argued these studies and others, including Apostoleris (1994), make a flawed case at [at or as?] a dichotomy, what is termed a "dualistic taxonomy of home education choice" between the religious and non-religious homeschool families. In their study, Apostoleris (1994) argued the choice was more about content and method than ideology and methodology; however, English (2020) has argued research shows the binary categories of choice are "universal." Nemer (2002) suggested that there was so much convergence between religious and non-religious homeschoolers that the groups were too flexible to hold much meaning in relation to understanding the drive to homeschool. For Nemer, most homeschool families draw from both groups. Jolly and Matthews (2017) agreed, stating Nemer's (2002) approach provided much-needed flexibility within Van Galen's (1991) original classification.

Attempting to address this, English's (2021a; 2021b; Moir & English, 2022; English, Campbell & Moir, 2023) work in Australia has tended to categorise the homeschool choice as either accidental or deliberate. For English (2021a; 2021b), **accidentals** did not make a deliberate choice. In order to address criticisms that "accidental" suggests unserious or "foolish," she used the term to connote that the choice was "forced" on the family. By contrast, she used the term "deliberate" to describe those families whose intention had always been to homeschool, whether the intention was religious, a-religious, ideological, or any other category.

As such, "deliberate" suggested that there was a time taken to make the choice because the families could see problems before they occurred. They would have fitted into both categories of Van Galen's (1991) work, as they were somewhat ideologically opposed to certain aspects of schooling (in particular, how they managed neurodivergent students) as well as pedagogues (in that they thought school was not really an effective means of educating young people). By contrast, the "accidentals" were forced into making a choice; most were choosing homeschooling in real time as the child's experiences of schooling meant the reality of staying in school unravelled around them. For many of these families, it may be that school refusal/school can't be a factor. The accidentals were chosen in response to the child's experiences on the ground, mostly while they were enrolled in schools, which aligns with data showing the main growth in the secondary phase of learning, suggesting much of the growth of homeschooling is in the previously schooled population. These families find themselves

home educating by accident, not by design, showing they are accidental home educators. They weren't in any way ideologically opposed to schooling, quite the opposite, growth in homeschooling enrolment in the secondary, and senior phase of learning in many cases suggested they are home educating in response to schools' failure to meet the needs of the family in relation to a child's education.

Unlike accidental home education families, the other group, deliberates, were always going to home educate. These families may be both ideologically and pedagogically opposed to schools, the institutional approach to learning and the state's authority to tell their children what it means to be educated. Most of the children in these families, English (2021a) suggested, had not ever attended school, so their children had no direct experiences of schooling; rather, her work suggested, their beliefs and experiences of schooling as a child (or a teacher) led to their decision to homeschool. These families tend to demonstrate what Van Galen (1991) described as a "full ideological commitment to home education … sometime after the initial decision to teach their children at home" (p. 67) or "believed that their children learned in unique ways that could not be accommodated by formal schools" (p. 72).

English (2021) noted how families may take on the responsibility to educate and do it all themselves and place all the pressure on themselves because all other options were found to be unsuitable or unsuccessful for their child. It may be due to the child's special education need (such as Autism), psychological need (such as trauma or anxiety), or in relation to bullying (Kuntzman & Gaither, 2013), or some other problem in schools. However, this

risk does not need to be directly felt; it may be perceived. For instance, some parents may perceive the school as a risk for their child, either because of the parents' experiences of school when they were students or because of their experiences of school as teachers, when they were teaching their own classes.

Styles of homeschooling

In Rebecca's story above, she described herself as an "eclectic" homeschooling parent to describe the learning that happened in her home. There are many different styles of learning in a homeschooling family. We argue homeschooling exists on a spectrum from highly unstructured to highly structured.

When the term home-schooling or home education is used, it encompasses a wide range of pedagogies and curricular choices that are decided on by the parent educator. Much broader than that of a mainstream approach. These choices are generally made based on a family's beliefs and opinions and are not randomly selected. The variety of styles and philosophies that are often (but not always) talked about by home-educating families, but many reject labels altogether and just say they're homeschoolers. Below, we outline many approaches (but not all) seen in the homeschooling approach. We chose to focus on those approaches most often seen in the literature on homeschooling families' choices of a style.

Traditional

This pedagogy of home learning is an approach that recreates the mainstream, traditional school day in the home. We use both the terms mainstream and traditional schooling because

different literatures use these two terms. They seem to be interchangeable and refer to school as it is stereotypically understood and would be familiar to a non-homeschooling family (textbooks, structured day, sat at a desk, key learning areas, and assessments such as national assessments for literacy and numeracy). The idea of repackaging the structure of school life in the home environment is implied by the term "traditional" homeschooling.

> It is familiar. Textbooks and workbooks are what the general population grew up on… the traditional schoolroom approach is one of the easiest methods to implement and use.
>
> (Suarez et. al 2006, p. 44)

The traditional learning that resembles a school day feels most familiar for both the learner and the parent educator. The initial time in homeschooling is often characterised by a "traditional" approach with parents attempting to replicate school at home; for many, that's all they know. But it usually doesn't last. Parents are recreating what is familiar while finding it does not work without the structure of school (teachers, principal, departments of education, the other attributes of school that make it work including bells and assemblies), as such, they tend to end up abandoning it because they are already unsure about school being effective and are already developing new beliefs around educating their child/ren. It is often in this initial phase of a new homeschool family that they start to question their own opinions and beliefs around how education should and can look for a child. From here, parent educators' confidence grows, and they may choose to begin to explore other learning styles and philosophies.

Classical

The classical pedagogy of homeschooling refers to ancient philosophers Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. The classical method of learning attempts to emulate the ways of these great minds through a modern practice based on ancient ideas. "Young people should be taught to ask questions rather than just be given information to memorize." (Robinson, 2013, p. 29). Home-educated students' reasoning skills are developed in depth with the end goal of producing deep critical thinkers. To have the "ability to take part in the great conversation and make a contribution towards our common life" (Robinson, 2013, p. 198). There are three phases or methods of learning in the Classical method that make up the trivium. The child/ren move through the trivium phases as they age and develop their skills in each phase: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Once the trivium is mastered, students move onto the quadrivium – astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, and music.

Stages of the Trivium

Grammar: (knowledge) The first stage lays the foundation for language, beginning from four years through to nine years old. The home learning student will learn phonics, grammar rules, spelling rules, math facts, historical facts, scientific facts, and more. The facts build the foundation for the next stage of the trivium. It is "intended to teach the pupil the proper use of the tools of learning, before they begin to apply them to 'subjects' at all." (Sayers, 1947)

Logic: (understanding) The second stage, beginning around ten years old, focuses on when a child begins to ask "why?" This is

where the home-educated child/ren begin to acknowledge and appreciate cause and effect, and develop ideas around more abstract thinking. Analysis of what is being read begins here, and thus begins critical thinking skills.

Rhetoric: (wisdom) around twelve years old, the home-educated child/ren uses both grammar (knowledge and facts) and logic (understanding) and applies them to their own unique, original thoughts.

Many classical homeschool families and programs include study of the Bible and have strong Christian foundations, referred to as classical Christian education (Arendash, 2023). Religion is generally at the centre of the learning, with the other classical topics working in harmony with the family's religious beliefs.

Charlotte Mason

To understand the practices and principles of Charlotte Mason homeschooling, we must look back to the late nineteenth century to Mason's first publication: *Home Education: The Training and Education of Children Under Nine*. Without a doubt, Charlotte Mason (1842–1923) was an educator ahead of her time. She developed an educational philosophy that spread throughout Britain and the US in the late 19th century (de Bellaigue, 2015). It is still followed today by many private mainstream schools, but more importantly, it has a large homeschool following. Mason's educational philosophy entails "three educational instruments – the atmosphere of environment, the discipline of habit, and the presentation of living ideas" (Mason, 2013, p. 32). Studies include religion, literature, history, language, arts, and science, often with a nature focus. There is often also a

strong Biblical focus in Charlotte Mason, and it is used by many Christian families.

Montessori homeschooling

Children following the Montessori educational framework work at an individual pace, and there are certain values for the child to follow. The Montessori environment is calm and quiet, and offers the child a chance to learn at their own pace. While the child has most autonomy in what they choose to engage with, it is a very organised process behind the scenes. These activities are far from surface-level "busy-ness" and are designed to build and develop on previously learned skills to eventually develop mastery of that skill. Behind the activity that appears simple has been a lot of research, observation and planning. The choices in materials and lessons on offer follow a pattern that was designed by Maria Montessori in order for the child to fully develop that skill. Practical life skills are an important component of the Montessori method.

The Montessori method follows the ideas of Maria Montessori (1870–1952), an Italian physician and educator. Putting her educational ideas aside, she was, in her time, a significant advocate for women's rights and was thrice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Montessori method entails supporting the full development of a human being. It is a multi-faceted approach that looks beyond textbooks for learning. The room in which a child learns is set up differently from conventional ideals. In the homeschool environment, the whole house can accommodate this idea. Furniture is child-sized, low, and in muted tones to reflect nature (Lilliard 2016). The materials chosen to be on display are