

UNDERSTANDING HOME EDUCATED STUDENTS TRANSITIONS INTO MAINSTREAM INSTITUTIONS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS

Glenda Jackson
JAC091584
Monash University

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Abstract:

There is currently no Australian research literature available on educational professionals' experiences with home educated students when they make the transition into various mainstream educational institutions. Seventeen educational professionals described their experiences with transitioning home educated students. Students were evaluated as having strong to excellent academic abilities and good to excellent social skills. The few academic problems identified in transitioning home educated students were linked to recognised learning difficulties while the social problems of a few students were linked by professionals to difficult family situations and family itinerancy rather than to the practice of home education. The findings indicate that professionals were frequently unaware of a number of key factors related to student transitions into mainstream institutions, including student histories prior to entrance into mainstream institutions, the curriculum used by home educated students and how these were similar or different to curriculum used in their institutions. Because professionals were also frequently unaware of parent reasons for home educating students, reasons for entering students into mainstream institutions, and student involvement in the decision to make these transitions, it is argued that more care and consideration be given to support these students in their transition into mainstream institutions. In order to ensure positive transition experiences for home educated students, this paper recommends proactive use of existing school transition programs in conjunction with a clearer understanding of the culture of home education.

Introduction:

While there is no definitive information regarding home education numbers in Australia, public perception is that it is a growing phenomenon (Power 2009, Rundle 2008). Currently there is scarce Australian research about the transition experiences of home educated students into such mainstream institutions as primary and secondary schools, TAFE and university (Jackson 2007). There is only one piece of Australian research on the views and experiences of educational professionals who have worked with these home educated students (Jackson 2009).

The literature on general school transitions suggested that good transitions were important for school success and that professionals had an important role to play in ensuring successful transitions (Cassidy & Gow 2005, Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) 2006, Docket & Perry 2003, 2006). This paper reports part of the findings of a three-way research project based in Victoria that explored the views and experiences of home educating parents and students and educational professionals who were involved in home educated student transitions with mainstream institutions (Jackson 2009). The focus here is on the views and experiences of educational professionals who worked with home educated students who had made transitions into their institutions. A mixed theory approach was used

to explore these meanings. Historical sociocultural theory was used as the foundational theory to discover meanings of home educated student learning and connection with community while critical theory was used to explore the impact of power in these transitions.

Home Education and Australian Transition Literature

While the research in Australia on home education is not extensive, research has consistently been growing. There have been five reports by various education departments of state governments on home education (Education Queensland 2003, Jacob, Barratt-Peacock, Carins, Holderness-Roddam, Home, Shipway, 1991, Jeffrey & Giskes, 2004, OBOS 2000, 2004), one post-doctoral study (Thomas 1998), three doctoral studies (Barratt-Peacock 1997, Jackson 2009, Reilly 2007) and a number of masters and honours projects and journal articles. This research reports on demographic information about home educating families, parent experiences and reasons for home educating students, and home educated student experiences. The research consistently indicates that the practice of home education provides students (gifted, average and learning disabled) with worthwhile academic and social experiences even though, and often because, these experiences are different to those experienced by students in mainstream institutions.

Australian home educators are known to use three basic approaches to their programs – formal, eclectic and natural learning approaches (Barratt-Peacock 1997, Jacobs et. al. 1991, Simich 1998, Thomas 1998). When using formal approaches, parents use curriculum and timetables similar to those used in typical mainstream classrooms. Families using eclectic approaches tend to choose curriculum from a variety of sources in response to family ideals, goals and student needs and interests while often allowing students to choose their own timetables. Families using natural learning approaches encourage and support students in their pursuit of interests and goals without reference to formal curriculum, structures and expectations. Families also tend to move to less formal approaches over time (Jacobs et. al. 1991, Thomas 1998, Reilly 2004, 2007) in response to changing students' needs and interests and parents' growing confidence.

One key point of difference between home educating families and mainstream society revolves around the meaning of socialisation. In Australia (Clery 1998), this difference has identified home educators' interest in students experiencing what has been termed 'vertical socialisation' where students learn to mix socially with people of all ages. This has been contrasted to socialisation with same aged peers (horizontal socialisation) as encouraged and expected in mainstream institutions.

There is also extensive Australian research on mainstream student transition experiences into and between various mainstream educational institutions such as home to kindergarten and primary school, primary school to secondary school, and secondary school to post compulsory educational institutions and employment (Jackson 2009). A number of common themes were consistent in this literature and included descriptions of transitions as moves between cultures. There were a number of factors known to impact student transitions and these included cultural differences, curriculum, continuities and discontinuities, family factors, institutional policies and structures, professional practices and attitudes, perspectives of all stakeholders and

student qualities such as their needs and ability to adjust. Three key words were consistently used in methods developed to ensure students were positively aided through these transitions – communication, collaboration and inclusion.

Known methods of improving student transitions into and between mainstream institutions called for professionals to proactively communicate and collaborate with parents and students. Continuity of transition was achieved through inclusive practices, transference of relevant student information, appropriate curriculum, and school community attitudes of acceptance and integration of students. Other professional initiatives included buddy systems (Vessey 2006), orientation visits (Chadwick 2000), student portfolios (Jones 2003), school readiness adjustment and assessment programs (Dockett & Perry 2003), peer support (Ellis, Marsh, Craven & Richards 2004), mentors (Adams & Miezio 2005, Knipe & Hussey 2004), pastoral care (Mursell 2005), school leadership development (Myers 2005), family resilience training (Shortt, Toumbourou, Chapman & Power 2006) and explicit pedagogy to help students integrate well (Bellert & Graham 2006).

Methodology and Sample

It was difficult to locate professionals who were aware they had worked with home educated students and the sample was developed through 'snow-balling' techniques (Wiersma 1995). Contacts were established through direct requests to a number of educational institutions, through parents, advertisements in a Victorian home education network newsletter – 'Otherways' (Russell-Head 2002), an alternative education conference and the researcher's personal acquaintances. Educational institutions included two different denominational Protestant primary schools, one state primary school, one alternative education primary school, one Protestant K-12 school and Distance Education by Correspondence Victoria (DECV) – primary. Four secondary schools included one Protestant secondary school, one Protestant K-12 school, one state secondary school and DECV – secondary. There was also one private tutor, one representative of an interstate international school, and one lecturer from an interstate private tertiary institution. The institutions represented were mostly located around the outer eastern and southern metropolitan areas of Melbourne. It was recognised that this sample could not be used to indicate more general professional interactions with home educating parents or students as neither the home educator population nor the population of professionals interacting with these home educators were knowable.

In spite of these limitations, the seventeen professionals included in the study had accumulated over 120 years of experience with seventy-one home educated students. There were nine female and eight male educational professionals. Professional experiences were divided unequally between these educational professionals. Three professionals interacted with students from seven home educating families, three professionals interacted with students from five home educating families, three professionals worked with students from three home educating families, four professionals worked with students from two home educating families and two professionals worked with students from one home educating family. Within each educational sector, there were divisions between principals/administrators and teachers. Five primary school principals interacted with twenty-five home educated students and four primary school teachers interacted with seven home educated

students. Three secondary school principals/administrators interacted with thirteen home educated students while one administrator chose to speak of her experiences with home educated students more globally.

Because this was a qualitative study, guided interviews were used to explore the subjective understandings professionals had of the transition experiences of home educated students into their institutions. Data were then coded using grounded theory approaches to develop the basic coding categories.

Theoretical Framework

To interpret these findings, historical sociocultural theory was used as the foundational theoretical framework. Possible connections between Australian home education practices and historical sociocultural theory had been explored elsewhere (Jackson 2008). However, key concepts of historical sociocultural theory relevant to this study include the historical, sociocultural nature of learning, socialisation and assessment, holistic and real life approaches to student learning, the importance of various forms of mentoring, the likely impact of professional attitudes towards home educated students and the significance of transitional experiences on the all round development of students. Critical theory has typically been used in educational settings to explore the balance of power in relationships and the impact these may have on student well being (Panofsky 2003). In this setting, educational professionals were placed in a position of power and authority over all students, including home educated students and families once students had made the transition into their institutions. It is important to recognise this balance of power when analysing home educated student transitions into mainstream institutions.

Professional Experiences

The specific detail of these professional educators' experiences with home educated students were reported elsewhere (Jackson 2009), however there were common themes arising from the study and included: professional initial assessment of student academic and social skills, the recognition that academic difficulties were more probably the result of known learning difficulties, and social problems most probably the result of family dysfunction or family itinerancy. Professionals first described student academic abilities and socialisation skills. Most professionals thought most students displayed strong academic abilities and healthy socialisation skills. When students displayed academic weaknesses, most professionals thought these were due to recognisable learning difficulties other than the practice of home education. Socialisation problems were described as more probably the result of family dysfunction, or family itinerancy rather than specifically caused by the practice of home education.

Primary Principals

The five primary school principals described the entry of twenty-seven home educated students from twelve families. Professional assessment focused on student academic and social abilities. Most children were academically competent when they arrived at school. Thirteen students were reported to have above average abilities, two students achieved good grades and one was professionally diagnosed as 'gifted'.

These professionals thought ten students from three families had problems academically. These three families were known to have itinerant lifestyles. Professionals recognised that the three children of one family had professionally identifiable learning difficulties. Principals described five home educated students as very social and another nine students who displayed no difficulties socially. There were, however, eight students who did appear to have some social problems adjusting to primary school. The types of social problems included the inability to fit in with classmates, inability to work with peer groups, immaturity and in one instance the apparent inability 'to be a child'. One student started well but this deteriorated over time as his parents went through a divorce. Another student started with some difficulties, but became more socially adept with time. One family was described as both an academic and social 'disaster' and the principal involved thought the family lacked stability. This principal thought the mother was 'unusual', 'flighty', and 'likely to chop and change' her views and expectations. The children were described as 'different' because they had 'home made haircuts' and the principal's defining description was that they were 'Hilly Billy.' Principals occasionally described situations where parents made demands on school resources or procedures that were outside normal institutional expectations.

Primary Teachers

The four primary school teachers, including two teachers from DECV described their experiences with seven home educated students and their families. The DECV teachers had taught two home educated students while one of the private school teachers had taught two students. These teachers described student academic abilities while two referred to the social interactions of two students. Four of these students were assessed as 'above the norm' academically as two of these students were thought to be 'extremely bright'. Three girls were described as presenting work 'beautifully' while two boys were described as having 'scant' or limited writing abilities. One student was assessed as having learning difficulties because of lower than expected reading and writing skills while at the same time verbally able to communicate well because of his 'general environmental awareness' which was assessed as 'above par'. DECV teachers were not comfortable assessing social skills. One teacher and the school principal thought one student, an only child, had limited social skills because they thought she had probably spent too much time with adults.

Summary of Primary Professional Experiences with Transitioning Home Educated Students

Primary professionals focused on student academic and social abilities. Most home educated students were described as having high academic abilities and good social skills. Professionals identified a few children with learning and social difficulties. When discussing probable contributing factors to these problems, professionals identified family itinerancy, family dysfunction and cultural difference as the most likely causes. Only one principal thought the practice of home education contributed to a few students having social and academic problems. Academic concerns seemed to focus mainly on student reading and writing abilities, with particular reference made to the development of 'pencil grip' and 'motor skills', or 'scant' and poorly presented written work. Four primary school principals and one primary school teacher expressed concern about the socialisation opportunities of a few home educated students. The socialisation experiences valued by these professionals related

to student interaction with peers and cooperation in social interactions within classroom settings.

Secondary School Principals and Administrators

One secondary school principal and one senior secondary school administrator discussed the entry into secondary school of thirteen students from six families. Most students were assessed as having achieved a high level academically and displaying no significant problems socially. These professionals identified such things as family circumstances and student personality as contributing factors to performance in school and did not attribute the practice of home education as the cause of possible problems. These two professionals thought parents sent children to school because they were seeking expert knowledge. One student was thought to 'cut loose' at school because he had greater freedom at school than at home.

Secondary School Teachers

Five secondary school teachers described their interactions with twenty-six home educated students. While the academic outcomes of two students were not mentioned, thirteen students were described as being high or very high academic achievers, seven as achieving good grades and four students with difficulties. The four students with difficulties used DECV and professionally suggested reasons for these difficulties included learning disabilities, parent objection to curriculum content, career or sporting pursuits, and lack of student motivation to learn as their parent had directed. DECV secondary teachers were not comfortable assessing student social abilities. The social abilities of sixteen students were assessed. Teachers thought two students adjusted really well, eleven were described as adjusting well, while three students were described as having problems socially. Teachers thought the social problems arose because of membership in an exclusive religious group, school cliques, pushy/domineering parents, limited contact with peers, and primary school bullying. One teacher found that two students with initially weak social skills improved over time in school while another teacher thought home educated students demonstrated mixed abilities. One teacher assessed a student with good social skills, particularly with adults, after two primary professionals had assessed this particular student as having social problems due to spending too much time with adults. Generally, secondary school teachers thought home educated students exhibited good social abilities. They also thought social problems experienced by a few students were not generally the result of home education practices. Some of these teachers did comment on the way these students adjusted to mainstream institutional practices. They found the students enthusiastic but unaware of classroom protocols or expected teacher student relationships. All felt these students responded positively, maturely and with resilience when teachers politely and clearly articulated their concerns and expectations about these discrepancies in behaviour.

Private Tutor and Tertiary Lecturer

The private tutor had worked with five home educated students. She felt the parent of her first home educated student wanted to control every aspect of the child's curriculum and the tutor felt uncomfortable with this. She found the other four students were easy to work with, enthusiastic about their subject, self-motivated, generally well-informed and socially competent. The tertiary lecturer chose to describe only one of his encounters with home educated students. His greatest concern was that the parent's limited world view and the isolated community in which

this particular student grew up contributed to this student's struggles with the different social expectations, actions and world-views of her peers and this subsequently lead to a fall in academic achievement over time.

Summary of Secondary and Tertiary Professional Experiences with Transitioning Home Educated Students

Secondary and tertiary professionals focused on the academic and social abilities of home educated students. Generally, these professionals described students with strong academic abilities and good social skills who made the transition into mainstream institutions with relative ease. When there were problems, professionals described contributing factors such as learning difficulties, family itinerancy, restrictive family world views or beliefs, family dysfunction or prior poor experiences in primary schools as the main reasons for students' difficulties both academically and socially.

Types of Movements of Home Educated Students

Principals and teachers identified home educated students' points of entry into their institutions. In the primary sector, principals and teachers described the inward movement of thirty-four home educated students. Ten of these students entered primary school in Year 6 as their first known contact with mainstream institutions. Nine families entered students as family groups of two, three and four students at a time, with most entering the eldest child into Year 6. Five students were thought to have attended primary school prior to a period of home education and return to mainstream institutions.

In the secondary sector, principal/administrators and teachers described the inward movement of twenty-seven students who were thought to have made their initial entry into mainstream institutions at this point. Two families were known to have entered mainstream institutions as family groups. Secondary professionals were only aware that five students had previously attended mainstream institutions prior to home education and re-entry into mainstream institutions. Eleven students entered Year 7 and nine students entered Year 11 from home education.

In primary school, principals and teachers did not often elaborate the reasons for parents entering students into their institutions. One principal thought mothers entered students in family groups because of maternal fatigue. Secondary school professionals were usually unaware of the exact histories and reasons students entered mainstream institutions although a number indicated that they thought parents wanted access to specialist knowledge they were unable to provide at home.

It became clear, from discussions with these professionals, that there was a general lack of knowledge about when students had previously made transitions with mainstream institutions, why families entered students into mainstream institutions and what type of curriculum parents had used with students at home.

Part-Time

Seven professionals briefly described their experiences with students who attended their institutions part-time. Five primary school educators thought the part-time programs had been beneficial for all parties. Two primary educators encouraged two

students from one family to attend a community classroom for three days a week to access specialist subject knowledge and experience school community. Both thought this was helpful to these particular students and the general classroom. Two of the primary professionals referred to the same student who attended three days a week and felt this worked well. One primary principal found that student initial attendance at sporting events made his later full transition into mainstream institutions easier. In the secondary sector, three secondary school teachers described different part-time arrangements. One Year 8 teacher thought attendance for a couple of days a week worked well as it encouraged the other mainstream students to think more openly about their own learning but was concerned that the particular student might have gaps in his learning. Another secondary school teacher found that regular student attendance for particular subjects worked well and felt the student involved progressed well. In a third part-time situation, students were encouraged to access specialist teachers and pursue advanced learning while interacting with mainstream peers and attending some regular classes. Two professionals thought that the lack of 'continuity' created some problems for some students.

General Professional Assessment of Home Educated Students Level of Education

Professionals were asked to make a general assessment of the level of education of home educated students. Seven professionals thought the students they had dealt with entered school with a generally high level of education. One professional thought her one home educated student entered her program at the level she expected. Three professionals thought home educated students' levels of education could vary considerably. Two professionals thought home educated students sometimes had 'gaps' in their education while a third professional thought all students had 'gaps' but these were not important in the overall picture of a student's education. One teacher also thought there could be differences in philosophies between home education and mainstream education revealing tensions in 'teaching models' and 'benchmarking' particularly in the case of part-time students.

Literacy and Numeracy Skills

I think they're good. Absolutely. (Abigail)

It's literacy and I can't really comment a lot about numeracy because I don't teach them maths, but some of them seem to me to be a bit weak in that. But ... I've seen kids from primary school that have not the foggiest notion ... I couldn't single them out and say that. No. (Leon)

This is just the sort of impression that I have of children that are home schooled ... have ... skills in certain areas in greater depth than they do ... in a normal institution and so ... they can be very high fliers in one [area]. (Nick)

Where you'd expect them to be. Some are actually, above expectations as regards that age group. (Russell)

All professionals, except one primary principal, thought most students exhibited average or above average literacy and numeracy skills. However, when discussing general home educated students' literacy and numeracy skills, six primary

professionals qualified their comments indicating general attitudes not necessarily favouring home education as a satisfactory form of education. Two professionals also made comments indicating their lack of awareness of home education programs used by the students they taught and of home education practices generally. One secondary school professional noticed some students excelled in one particular area of interest, often more noticeably than mainstream peers. The average and above average literacy and numeracy skills of home educated students observed by these professionals about particular students were consistent with home education research both in Australia and overseas (Davis 2000, Harding 2003, Luebke 1999, Mayberry, Knowles, Ray & Marlow 1995, McColl 2005, Rothermel 2004, Rudner 1999, Thomas 1998).

Social Abilities and Development

I met her on two occasions, she'd been fine, but ... that was only ... with adults. There was the two girls of the family ... and the mother and myself. But she seemed outgoing and... certainly in her written work, there was lots of engagement with family and other people. (Bev)

Sort of a caring ... way with her ... Tended to wander a lot. Not join in activities, sporting activities as much. (Lucy)

Her worldview was rather small and therefore she had trouble with things outside that range. (Lynden)

Funnily enough ... the social skills on the whole, they were pretty good. (Marielle)

They ... most certainly enjoyed having other children around them. (Phil)

Because I saw that as the biggest deficit in what they were doing ... the aspect of working with other children, n' other adults ... those social skills are the same, so important. (Russell)

It's a big challenge and transition, to come from a home schooled environment ... to the main school ... and when they come in to a group of kids who have different values, different ways of doing things, that sometimes they're reticent to get involved, because they don't see those kids meeting values that they've learnt are important. (Tony)

The professionals in this project generally found most home educated students were socially competent, especially when given time to adjust. Overall, professionals reported forty-two students who functioned well socially. There were also sixteen DECV students who DECV teachers were reticent to assess socially. However, professionals expressed some concern for the weak social abilities of fourteen students. At least three of these students developed socially during their part-time mainstream institutional experiences. Professionals thought family dysfunction and itinerancy had contributed to poor social behaviour in ten students. These generally positive assessments of home educated students' social abilities were consistent with both Australian and overseas home education research literature on socialisation of

home educated students (Barratt-Peacock 1997, Broadhurst 1999, Brosnan 1991, Clery 1998, Harding 1997, 2006, Jeffrey & Giskes 2004, Mayberry, Knowles, Ray & Marlow 1995, Thomas 1998).

Initially all professionals described student social skills as the ability to get on with peers. When asked to define socialisation, four professionals referred to student ability to socialise with peers and one applied it to student classroom behaviour. Social development was described as the ability to get on with others, employability, make conversation, or as personal qualities such as 'humility,' 'compassion,' 'flexibility' and understanding of 'relationship' even though these were recognised as 'huge' expectations. Four professionals found it difficult to define socialisation. Two principals explained socialisation as an awareness of one's place in society and ability to manage this within the systems of society and the ability to make decisions within respectful boundaries of society, others and personal needs.

Professionals described positive personal qualities of home educated students and thought these were sometimes missing in their mainstream peers. These qualities included depth of personality, good manners, independence, self-direction and responsibility. Two professionals described these students as 'very grounded' and one added that home educated students were a mix of strength and sensitivity, vulnerability and open emotions while also demonstrating resilience and the ability to 'be themselves.' Another professional thought it very empowering for children to realise their parents understood and provided for their needs.

Ten professionals thought socialisation was their biggest concern about the practice of home education. While two professionals thought the students they taught had social skills, they knew of others through colleagues who had difficulties socialising. The transition experience was described as a potentially difficult experience and one professional described it as a move between two cultures. Another professional questioned the value of the social experiences of mainstream students, particularly during school breaks.

Adjustment to Formal Education

The home schooling children are generally very well behaved. Very, very few behaviour problems with home school, apart from the social ones of not being able to mix. (Helen)

The parent of the child that I've got ... would like to know ... where their child is against benchmarks for example. And so, without having to totally institutionalise the child, it would be good for there to be easily accessible ways for home school kids to check whether they're at. (Steve)

Six professionals indicated that all of their students had adjusted to mainstream education without difficulty. Two other professionals thought the majority of their students had adjusted well to mainstream institutions except for a few students. Family factors were identified as the key factor contributing to poor transitions into mainstream institutions. Three professionals theorised about students benefiting from some form of transition program and thought the social dimension needed particular focus. In one school, parents often began negotiations six months in advance of

transitions to ensure student academic parity to mainstream peers. Professionals thought problems adjusting to mainstream institutions were the result of family dynamics, itinerancy, curriculum differences, overly narrow world views, too much time in adult company and student personality. Two professionals found students needed time, about a term, to settle in. One professional thought his home educating family would have liked some way of assessing the comparability of the student's academic levels with mainstream practices. Another observed that a few students found the adjustment a 'struggle' especially when the parent was making all the decisions. The overall adjustment of these home educated students into mainstream education was mostly successful, especially with time, and without noticeable problems according to these professionals. One professional mentioned student problems with time management when using DECV. Home educated student ease of adjustment in transitions into mainstream institutions was in keeping with overseas literature (Goymer 2001, Gray 1998, Holder 2001, Jenkins 1990, Lattibeaudiere 2000, Prue 1997). Krout (2001) found that students who had experienced social difficulties when involved earlier in mainstream institutions sometimes experienced difficulties when re-entering mainstream institutions at a later date and the findings in this study were similar.

Evaluation of Experiences with Home Educated Students and their Parents

Eleven professionals summed up their experiences working with home educated students as positive. Five were particularly positive about their overall interactions with home educated students and their families. One primary professional prefaced her positive comments working with two students she had earlier evaluated as above average students with: 'Well, it wasn't a failure.' Another thought home education was not something everyone could or should do as he thought parents needed to be prepared and committed. A third professional thought she had limited experience with home educated students but would like to work with home educated students at her school in the future. Three professionals expressed their reservations about some aspects of home education from their personal experiences and observations. In particular, they thought some home educated students had 'social' problems when they entered mainstream education.

Professionals made other concluding comments. Two primary school professionals wondered about parent motivation to home educate and then later to enter students into mainstream institutions although one thought re-entry was due to maternal fatigue. Two secondary school professionals thought it important to provide good communication and clear guidelines for effective transition. Another secondary professional knew of two students who had meandered in and out of mainstream institutions on a number of occasions and successfully entered university without their Victorian Certificate of Education.

The experiences of these professionals with home educators varied from generally excellent and positive interactions to a few that were less than positive for the professionals, students and home educating families involved. Key concerns of professionals about home educated students centred on student academic levels and social abilities. Most professionals found students were usually well established academically unless there were learning disabilities or contributing family factors. The majority of students professionals worked with also exhibited healthy social

abilities. A few professionals were concerned about students receiving good academic foundations but most professionals expressed greatest concern for the social development of home educated students. This view was held even though the majority of students with whom they had worked appeared to have had no social problems entering mainstream institutions.

While a number of professionals noted the resilience and self-motivation of a number of home educated students, few professionals commented on whether these students had developed healthy self-concepts or not. Many of these professionals recognised the various restrictions mainstream education placed on their ability to provide adequately for the variety of individual student needs. These tensions were specifically acknowledged in the areas of curriculum, time frames for learning and catering for various learning styles. They expressed a feeling of disempowerment about their own abilities to meet these needs in mainstream institutions. Tensions became obvious between their personal experiences and their understandings and attitudes towards home education in general. Most professionals knew little about the programs parents used, the prior histories or the typical outcomes of students who had been home educated and how students might view their experiences. There was also little professional understanding of the reasons parents moved children into and out of mainstream institutions. A few of these professionals indicated they thought home educators were 'different' to typical members of society with whom they worked.

Analysis: What Professionals May Not Know

Because the original research project (Jackson 2009) also incorporated interviews with home educating parents and students, including four three-way interviews of professionals, parents and students, it was possible to more clearly identify areas of tension and discontinuity that discussions just with professionals might not have uncovered. Professionals were generally unaware of the specifics of students' prior histories before attending their schools. They generally knew little of particular parents' reasons for home educating students nor reasons for students being entered into their institutions. More particularly, most professionals did not know what type of curriculum parents and students had used prior to entering their institutions. This professional unawareness of prior student histories in mainstream institutions and the ensuing complications to student transitions is well documented in Australian transition literature (DEST 2006, Hayes & Chodkiewicz 2005, Perry & Dockett 2006, Timperley, McNaughton, Howie & Robinson 2003). In this instance this meant that professional understanding of the reasons for home education and then entry into mainstream institutions were limited and that initial assessment of student abilities in all areas could be vague and imprecise.

Some parents described the way mainstream education had not been able to cater for their students and these included curriculum not matched to student interest, time frames inappropriate for particular student abilities, and tuition not matched to learning styles. Parents also felt that mainstream institutions did not adequately consider family concerns and lack of family time or adequately support the development of healthy student self concepts. Both parents and students valued vertical socialisation (Clery 1998) where students learnt to mix with people in all age brackets with ease. This view of socialisation was distinct to the views about socialisation expressed by the professional educators in this study who generally

described socialisation as the ability to mix with peers and function within typical classroom protocols and expectations.

Students (Jackson 2009) appreciated aspects of both their home and mainstream educational experiences. At home students valued their autonomy to choose when they learnt, what they learnt, and most late primary school and older students either made the decision or contributed to the family decision to attend mainstream institutions. These students sought access to specialist teachers, peer interaction with learning and social contact. Professionals were unaware of this degree of autonomy in the home educated students in their institutions. Students enjoyed many aspects of their mainstream educational experiences but spoke most positively about their interactions with teachers who they considered to be more informed friends and mediators of learning. While the students entered mainstream institutions with ease, many reported that the way they viewed themselves when they entered mainstream institutions was lower than it had been at home. These students did not comparatively evaluate themselves with anyone and accepted themselves for who they were without reference to others while at home. When they entered mainstream institutions they were faced with continual assessment and comparison by teachers and peers and could find this disconcerting. Professionals also noted that these students were sometimes unaware of typical classroom and schoolyard protocol. Most professionals found that clear instructions and friendliness provided these students with the understandings they needed to change to more acceptable behaviour with poise and maturity. If students understood this cultural difference between home and mainstream institutions they might make the adjustment with greater ease and less misunderstanding about their own self-conceptions.

Connections to Theories

Professional assessment of home educated student abilities focused on the academic and social abilities of these students but often lacked information of past student histories or limited or failed recognition of student embeddedness in real world learning environments, healthy but different self-concepts and vertical social skills. This professional failure to recognise and understand these other important qualities indicated a failure to assess students holistically within the historical sociocultural settings students had come from – an important quality recognised by historical sociocultural theorists (Jackson 2008). While there were generally positive assessments of home educated students and their families, there were instances where a few professionals evaluated students and families from more personal perspectives rather than by being informed by research or acceptance of difference. In other research, professionals were known to have previously stereotyped and limited students and families (Panofsky 2003). Recognition of the power dynamics held by educational professionals as the accepted educational authorities in society, when dealing with home educators who are not accepted as official educators in society, should be an important consideration when respectfully providing these students with meaningful transition experiences (Jackson 2009, Reilly 2004, 2007).

Conclusions: Possible Transition Programs and Considerations

The experiences of home educated students moving into mainstream institutions exemplify many of the qualities typical of mainstream student transitions into and within mainstream institutions (Jackson 2009). These professionals generally

considered these transition programs to be successful for all parties. However, because typical school report cards are not available to professionals from home educating families, it is suggested that a portfolio of work (Fleer & Richardson 2004) and discussions between professionals, parents and students would be a useful means of assessing student levels of work and ability. Because these students were typically involved in the decision to enter mainstream institutions in late primary and more particularly in secondary schools and post compulsory school institutions (Jackson 2009), it would be useful for professionals to engage these students in discussions about their entry into mainstream institutions. A few professionals, as well as some home educating parents and students, also reported the usefulness of orientation days, particularly those where students met peers in social situations, tours of institutions, buddy systems and occasionally mentors for those struggling with some aspects of the transition (Jackson 2009). On the basis of these professional observations, when students have difficulties with academic work, it would be worth considering and testing for various learning difficulties. Professionals found that a few students struggled with some aspects of school socialisation. In other research (Jackson 2007, 2009) some home educated students reported having problems with bullying, schoolyard cliques and differences in values to students in mainstream institutions. Because these students were used to adult mediated discussions their values and attitudes could be more mature than their peers. These students should not be penalised for this and it is suggested that professionals be aware of these differences and offer supportive and understanding solutions to apparent problems. Students who have previously experienced social difficulties in mainstream institutions (Jackson 2007, 2009, Krout 2001) may need specific counselling, mentoring (Adams & Miezio 2005, Knipe & Hussey 2004) and support.

Professionals who worked with home educated students generally found they made the transition into mainstream institutions with ease both academically and socially. Where there were difficulties, professionals identified factors other than the practice of home education such as learning difficulties, family dysfunction or itinerancy as more probable reasons for these difficulties. Home educated students can be supported through their transitions into mainstream institutions when professionals recognise this as a move between two cultures and that general transition programs offer effective ways of contributing to the smooth transitions of home educated students into mainstream institutions.

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