Homeschool Regulation:
Directive without Direction

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

..................................................

(Megan Kammann)
Abstract

Literature and first-hand accounts assert that home education and schooling are fundamentally different forms of education and that homeschooling has long been associated with positive educational outcomes. In 2012, the Western Australian School Curriculum and Standards Authority directed all Western Australian schools and home educators to begin implementing the Australian Curriculum (a Foundation to Year 10 syllabus specifying yearly-delineated content). Home educators received no explanation as to how they could apply such a detailed, fixed syllabus to their unschool-like settings and the only assistance offered came in the form of a reference to the official Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority website.

The aim of this research is to determine how homeschooling parents perceive this directive, how (or if) they intend to satisfy its obligations and whether evidence suggests that superior educational outcomes are likely to result. It is argued that parents’ perceptions of homeschool requirements are of critical importance as accurate evaluation of home education is extremely difficult particularly if parents choose to eschew registration.

A qualitative paradigm with an interpretive phenomenological emphasis was utilized to understand parents’ responses, actions and decisions. To this end, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in March 2013 with thirteen home educators. Participants were recruited from Perth and south-west Western Australia using purposive and snowball sampling.

The findings of this study indicate there is a wide disparity in parents’ willingness to adopt the Australian Curriculum into their homeschool settings. Some parents indicate an inclination to adjust the way they report educational experiences rather than to modify their actual practices. This study concludes that imposing a regulatory framework intended for mainstream schools onto home educating families actually restricts the use of flexible practices which have significantly contributed to the positive educational outcomes of homeschooled children in the past.
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the assistance and contribution of many wonderful people.

I attribute the commencement of this project primarily to my husband, Ian, who suggested that I go to Murdoch and find something useful to do with my time, and to Dr Nado Aveling who took me seriously when I landed on her office doorstep. I also thank Associate Professor Ute Mueller and Emeritus Professor Brian Hill for their vote of confidence in agreeing to act as referees when I formally applied to undertake this study.

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I thank the thirteen women who participated directly in this research – I greatly appreciate their time, candour and, in many cases, their ongoing support. I commend these mothers for their selfless dedication to their families and only wish I had met them earlier so that I could have applied what I learned from them in my own home.

I also thank my sons, Woody, Jonty and Brady, who are the inspiration for this work – they are such amazing young men from whom I have learned much. And I thank Ian, my constant support and encouragement for 24 years, whose belief in me has enabled me to achieve beyond my expectations.

Above all, I thank my Heavenly Father who has lovingly and faithfully directed my path from the beginning of this study (Prov 3:5&6) and has proven once again that, with Him, nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37).
It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wreck and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty.

- Albert Einstein

(Einstein, 1951, p.17)

Innovative educators are like orchestra leaders. They turn their backs on the crowd.

– Everett Rodgers.

(in Glines, 2012, p.75)
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1. Introduction

Research beginnings

In 2013, the Education Department of Western Australia mandated the introduction of the Australian Curriculum for schools. This decision and the Curriculum itself met with considerable disapproval from some members of the educational community. For example, Ditchburn stated “The Australian curriculum is being introduced as a decontextualized edifice, depersonalized and homogenized; it has eschewed the celebration of difference and adopted a one-size-fits-all approach…” (2012b, p.259).

Western Australian home educators were likewise directed to implement this new curriculum. If Ditchburn’s assessment of the Australian Curriculum is correct, then home education\(^1\), which is by nature diverse and individualized, would now be regulated to conform to a system which is fundamentally inflexible and standardized.

At this time, I had just finished fifteen years of educating my sons at home. I felt that so much of the educational good I had achieved with them stemmed from my ability to target their needs and interests and to make learning relevant. How could home educated children continue to benefit from the inherent features of homeschooling if parents would now be constrained by the mandatory use of a tightly structured curriculum? How would home educators respond to this regulation? In this thesis I aim to investigate how Western Australian home educating parents perceive the Australian Curriculum and seek to establish the range of their responses to its requirements. How are parents interpreting the Education Department directives? Will they be able, and indeed willing, to change their programs to satisfy these new obligations?

\(^1\) Throughout this work I have used the terms ‘homeschooling’ and ‘home education’ interchangeably to refer to situations where a parent/guardian is the principal educator of their children. While there is a subtle difference described in some texts viewing ‘homeschooling’ as a more formal and ‘school-like’ approach than ‘home education’, I will not evoke any such distinction in my use of these terms.
There is substantial evidence to suggest that growing numbers of parents in western nations, including Australia, are turning to home education to meet their children’s educational needs (Bunday, 2013, Thomas, 1998, p.2). Anecdotal evidence, as I will discuss later, suggests that many of these are students for whom mainstream systems do not ‘fit’. This being the case, establishing effective homeschool regulation, which facilitates flexible learning experiences, will become increasingly important.

In order to ascertain the responses of home educating parents to the mandated use of the Australian Curriculum, I have adopted a qualitative approach using a three-phased framework proposed by Kögler (2008) (this will be expounded in detail in Chapter 3). The principal findings will be realized from a review of relevant literature and data collected from semi-structured interviews with thirteen home educators. To establish a meaningful foundation for this work, I will outline my own homeschooling experiences in the remainder of this chapter.

**My background experiences**

I began teaching in 1991. By the birth of my second son in mid-1997, I had taught in several government high schools, a senior college, a university and several Christian schools; initially as a permanent mathematics teacher and later in a part-time capacity to fit my family situation. My husband, Ian, was also a mathematics teacher. As a young married couple with the same profession, we spent a great deal of time conversing about our work.

With regards to homeschooling, there were several events of significance in these early years of teaching. Firstly, Ian and I were exposed to numerous different philosophies and methods of teaching. Many of our experiences as teachers were positive but we also perceived deficiencies in each of the educational systems with which we became familiar. Some of these were of a practical nature such as a lack of resourcing or teacher support; some were of a more ideological nature – some we found insignificant though many seemed substantial.
One memorable day in 1993, well before our first son was born, Ian and I both experienced situations in our respective schools which we personally found abhorrent and, without even knowing what the other had experienced, concluded that we would rather our children, if ever we had them, were not exposed to such events. When we met at the end of the day and relayed our stories, we discussed for the first time the option of homeschooling our potential offspring. Given our beliefs, we felt this was not coincidence but was, instead, divine direction.

A second definitive event occurred several years later when our eldest son, Woody, was two years old. Ian was teaching at a Christian college. At a staff social, we began talking with the religious education teacher. During that conversation he explained some of his extremely unorthodox beliefs which dealt with issues central to the Christian faith. This came as a shock to me – if I was a parent sending my child to this school for a Christian education, how would I know what they were being taught? This was potentially more disturbing than overtly offensive situations as a child would not necessarily see error in teaching that was presented as Christian but was, nonetheless, worlds away from Biblical teaching. At this point I was deeply convicted that Ian and I were solely responsible for our children’s education. We alone, were accountable for what our children learned.

It was around this time that Ian and I began searching for answers as to why Woody was displaying unusual behaviours. After several visits to doctors and specialists, Woody was diagnosed with cerebral palsy – a condition he had had from birth which was mild enough that we, as novice parents, had not identified it. It answered a lot of our questions regarding his physical and behavioural peculiarities and was the start of 15 years of recurrent visits to medical practitioners of all manner of specialties.

**Homeschooling beginnings**

We moved to Manjimup, to the family farm, in December 1997. Now with two sons, I gave up any attempt to juggle teaching with family and settled into farm life. Woody was a naturally curious child with a voracious appetite for discovery so, even though
he was only three years old, I began teaching him to read. It was a gentle start to our homeschooling but, with his natural affinity for books, it was not long before he was reading fluently. Writing was different. Because of his cerebral palsy, Woody had difficulty with, amongst other things, his fine motor skills. Our occupational therapist was able to offer us some innovative activities and exercises which greatly helped.

However, this disparity in abilities became indicative of Woody’s learning. What he was good at, he excelled in; what he was weak at, he really struggled with. With these marked strengths and weaknesses I could appreciate from early on that home education was ideally suitable for him – in a classroom where all activities were aimed at an ‘average’ level, he would have inevitably fluctuated between boredom and frustration. This was confirmed by the many specialists who assessed him and advised us on how to manage his behaviours, difficulties and sensory perception problems in a classroom environment. They were, without exception, joyfully surprised when told that we homeschooled, convinced that this would bypass many of the issues they anticipated for children who presented with Woody’s conditions. It was also confirmed when he attended school for one semester at the end of Grade 1.

In February 2000, I gave birth to my third son and did my best to juggle the needs of my toddler and my five-year-old with the demands of a newborn baby. This period also coincided with a time of financial struggle which resulted in Ian spending several evenings a week teaching at TAFE$^2$ and a time when Ian’s parents required additional support from him. Consequently, Ian was frequently absent four evenings a week and for chunks of time on weekends. Lacking support, I felt that I could not cope with Woody’s special educational needs as well. Although not our preferred plan, we thought it best to enrol him in a local primary school until I could better manage the situation at home. For us, home education was the preferred educational option but we did not believe it was the only choice – we perceived that home education should only be undertaken if it could be as good as or better than alternative options.

$^2$ TAFE (Technical and Further Education) is a system of state and territory owned vocational tertiary education and training institutions throughout Australia.
We chose the smallest of the government schools in our area as we believed it to have the better pastoral care and because, twice a week, Woody had been attending their physical education program, so he knew some of the students. So, on the first day of Semester 2, 2000, I dropped Woody at school and cried all the way home. Despite believing I was doing the best by my family, I had feelings of guilt and failure mixed with the relief. Since having children, ‘doing school’ had never been on my radar and it took some time to get used to handing over that particular responsibility.

However, placing Woody in school created as many problems as it solved. At this time his sensory perception difficulties were diagnosed which led to numerous meetings with his kind, experienced teacher regarding his attention problems in class. There were also numerous incidents which occurred during break times resulting from Woody’s lack of ability to ‘read’ social situations and react appropriately. On a number of occasions I woke the baby so I could bundle the two youngest boys into the car and park outside the school to watch Woody in the playground at lunch time. It was heartbreaking to sit and watch him as he tried to join in other children’s games but was unable to perceive that they didn’t want him around. They would then take further steps to encourage him to leave. Academically he held his own though much of his written work came home unfinished. I felt that home life during this time was not overly positive either, as it seemed that much of those precious out-of-school hours were spent doing homework and correcting undesirable attitudes and behaviours – there just wasn’t much down time to enjoy being together.

Thus, we struggled on and saw out that semester but resolved to keep Woody at home the following year. Though the external commitments on Ian’s time remained for a further 12 months, by the time the 2001 school year arrived I had finished breastfeeding baby Brady and my three-year-old Jonty was now successfully toilet trained. These achievements, and a renewed sense of purpose, provided an environment to successfully recommence home education.
As the younger boys grew, they, too, began learning to read and write. It became evident that they also had strengths and weakness, though not as extreme as their older brother – in some subjects they were ahead of their peers, in others they needed a gentle pace and a lot of repetition.

Home education allowed me to meet each of my sons at their level of ability in each subject. Most beneficially, I was able to design a curriculum for Woody which enabled him to cope with a great deal of content while working around his inability to write extensively – I did not want his learning to be limited by his lack of writing proficiency. Hence, we did a great deal of work orally. Comprehension and arithmetic particularly lent themselves to this approach. By practising multiplication tables orally, I found we could cover reams of questions quite quickly and Woody would get instant feedback so that mistakes weren’t repeated and correct answers were reinforced. It was better learning with much less effort. Comprehension was similar. I could ask Woody questions from the textbook and receive detailed answers; much more detailed than if he was writing them. Often I would ask unscripted questions to clarify a point or to provoke deeper thought. Occasionally, I would ask him to write full sentence answers just so I knew he could and to have something to show the moderator\(^3\) but mostly we just didn’t need to. It was so efficient and effective but there wasn’t always much resultant paperwork.

In addition to the academic benefits, having Woody with me all day allowed us to incorporate physical exercises and behavioural strategies into our daily routines. The Cerebral Palsy Association called this ‘Using the Opportunity’ and encouraged all teachers and parents to use this strategy as a team in a child’s life. Being both teacher and parent allowed me to implement a consistent, thorough and holistic program without time pressures. We had wonderful flexibility in joining with the local school for their gym program several times a week, of going to local parks to use

\(^3\) A home education moderator is employed by the Department of Education Western Australia to advise, monitor and assess the delivery of home education in an assigned district. This is usually fulfilled through ‘home visits’ or interviews.
the large, solid play equipment and of doing one-off swimming or exercise programs as they became available in the community. Seeing specialists at irregular but frequent intervals was also simplified as, living four hours from Perth (our state capital), these appointments would often require a one or two day round trip and we could take our lessons with us or take advantage of excursion opportunities.

Learning and unlearning

My approach to home education was predicated on my understanding of learning and, like so many other beliefs, this evolved and matured over time. As a trained secondary teacher, it was not surprising that I began homeschooling using a structured approach – I was comfortable with timetables, schedules, bookwork and learning taking place within four walls. In order to appreciate the aspects of home education which make it so flexible and effective, I had to first unlearn much of my classroom teaching strategies. I feel now that that my teacher training and experiences actually inhibited my ability to be an effective home educator. Below, I will briefly outline four fundamental lessons I learned as a homeschooling mum.

The first and most obvious discovery was the complete freedom I had in which resources I used and how I used them – I could choose bits of different texts for one subject, we could do just a few questions on a page (if the child really understood the concept at hand), I could skip whole sections of irrelevant content and, most revolutionary for me, I didn’t have to finish a certain text or subject by the end of the year. These concepts sound elementary but, coming from my ‘teacher’ mindset, I found these flexibilities truly ground-breaking. I didn’t need to waste time doing anything that wasn’t directly advancing my children’s learning – no busy work, no endless repetition and yet we could take as much time as needed to learn things well.

Secondly, I discovered a plethora of possible ways to cover material many of which were unsuitable for classroom teaching and did not involve bookwork. For example, we could watch a documentary, stop it and discuss issues as questions arose or petition a relative, friend or community member to enliven our understanding of a
topic, often at short notice. With mathematics and spelling, we discovered a vast array of games useful as alternatives to bookwork and, as explained earlier, I realized the power in doing work orally, particularly with Woody. Learning was interesting, efficient and effective but there wasn’t always a lot on paper to show for it.

Thirdly, it took me many years to see that intrusions were actually learning opportunities and it was not just acceptable but valuable to drop bookwork if something came up. Like the time when a swarm of bees took up residence in our garden and we researched hive behaviour on the internet. Another time one of our sheep sank in the mud at the dam’s edge and needed rescuing which lead to discussions and subsequent experiments of pressure as force per unit area. Initially, after the event, I would think, “Right, we haven’t done much work today, we still have schoolwork to do” but I eventually came to see these interruptions as wonderful opportunities to learn in contexts my children understood. Visitors and workmen who came to our farm became sources of new information and learning. Having the freedom to drop everything and make the most of ‘teachable moments’ is rarely an option with other forms of education but is such a powerful tool for learning as interest and relevance are heightened. I found that concepts learned this way were remembered far longer than facts memorized from a book.

Homeschooling also permitted us to take advantage of planned outings. We would frequently use advertised events as triggers for further learning. Events such as special exhibitions at Scitech\(^4\) or the museum, a visit to Parliament House, a stage production at a theatre, a stay from an overseas friend or a family holiday were all, at times, used to direct or supplement our learning. Many times, these events would incorporate different learning areas. For example, after watching the Shakespearean play, As You Like It, at a local theatre we used it to further our studies of both literature and history. A weekend stay by a Mexican exchange student allowed us to

\(^4\) Scitech is a science discovery centre in Perth containing interactive scientific displays and a planetarium.
learn a few words of Spanish, gain an understanding of where she lived and develop some culinary skills as we prepared a Mexican meal under her guidance.

Lastly, formal teaching had also given me a distrust of students to choose wisely and to direct their own learning. I was taught that students needed to be handled in such a way as to move them along in the desired direction; they had to be coerced in order to optimize their uptake of prescribed materials and to produce desired outcomes. When I began homeschooling I naturally felt it was incumbent on me to impart to my sons the knowledge which I deemed most useful. I still believe there is a core set of skills and knowledge (such as the abilities to communicate and reason) which is important to acquire in order to be a well-functioning adult and citizen, however, I have come to realize that there is much which is considered important which one can, not just survive but, thrive without. What is important is that students develop the ability to learn and much of the content used is just a vehicle for that. Since different children respond to some topics more than others, it makes sense to take students’ interests into consideration whenever possible.

As I learned these lessons, I allowed my sons increasing autonomy over their learning. However, even in the beginning I realized that I could use their passions as catalysts to maximize learning. A notable illustration is my approach to Jonty’s reading. Since his dinosaur-themed party on his fourth birthday, Jonty had developed a love of all things dinosaur. He did not have the same natural love of reading and books as his older brother and, at the age of six, despite having access to a lot of reading materials, I had been unsuccessful in motivating him to want to read. “I don’t need to read, I can just look at the pictures,” he matter-of-factly stated. So, I decided to overtly link his learning to dinosaur literature in order to heighten his motivation. We began with the alphabet. We constructed a scrapbook and, as he learned the sounds of a letter, we would research dinosaurs beginning with that letter and write them down. We added stickers and pictures and the names of family members and friends which also began with that letter. As a special treat I would find some obscure dinosaur for each letter as he learned it, and read to him about its
location, its weight and height, its habitat and peculiarities. He lapped it up. In addition to this, I searched high and low for easy-to-read dinosaur books, both fictional and scientific, so that he could practise what he’d learned. It was not long before Jonty was reading proficiently.\(^5\)

**My thoughts on prescribed curriculum**

I believe it makes a great deal of sense to know what a student in a classroom should have learned thus far so that both repetition and gaps are limited. Having a structured syllabus safeguards a progression of expectations with regard to abilities and a flow of content. This is entirely logical – in a classroom context. But I believe that imposing an arbitrary, generic schedule of content and skills onto homeschooling contexts is quite unnecessary and unhelpful as it constrains the freedoms which allow each child’s needs to be targeted (and which, having learned the hard way, I now value so highly). It actually truncates educational opportunities.

Stipulating specific content which must be covered is particularly restrictive. As previously discussed, I believe that using incidental opportunities is one of the great strengths of home education. If fixed curriculum takes priority, focus must necessarily be centred on manufactured learning experiences and natural learning opportunities may well be undervalued. Following are two examples from my experiences of learning triggered by situation rather than curriculum.

Firstly, in 2006, our family took a driving holiday along the Western Australian coastline to Geraldton, Kalbarri, Carnarvon and Dampier. We returned home via the inland route. Prior to leaving, we researched early explorers and pioneers of the region. We studied the landscapes, rivers, animals and plants we were likely to see and investigated some of the industries prevalent there. During our trip we consolidated what we had learned and visited many historical sites and museums, \(^\)\\

\(^5\) Just as a point of interest, Jonty is now studying a science degree at the University of Western Australia majoring in biology and geology with the aim of postgraduate studies in palaeontology – he still loves dinosaurs.
climbed along gorges at Kalbarri and Karajini, sailed to Dirk Harthog Island, toured the port at Dampier and much more. This was valuable, hands-on, situated learning aimed at making the most of our opportunities rather than ticking off arbitrary check-points.

As a second example, we lived in India from 2009 to 2011. Before we left we studied Indian money and how much it was worth. We found the image of the same bald man wearing glasses on each denomination of rupee note. Who was he? What did he do? What sort of wildlife would we expect to see in Tamil Nadu? Why are tigers protected? Do spitting cobras really spit? Where is Ootacamund located and what sort of climate could we expect? What is a monsoon? We asked and answered many more questions, too. Except, perhaps, for some study of the ancient peoples of India, little of our study would have fit easily with the Australian Curriculum – it would not have been considered valid. We had many adjustments to make in those two years but we would have had many more if we had not done this ‘homework’.

**Introduction to this study**

We returned from India in July 2011. Woody entered Year 11 at the local school with the aim of obtaining an ATAR⁶ and progressing on to tertiary studies. Brady and Jonty, then in Years 7 and 9 respectively, resumed homeschooling with me for the next 18 months with the aim of transitioning to the local high school in January 2013.

In November 2012, I received a letter (Appendix A) from the local District Education Office which began “The Director General has now formally advised home education moderators that home schooling families should begin implementing the four learning areas of the Australian Curriculum that are now available…” and continued, “By 2015, all Australian schools will implement the full Australian Curriculum, and home educating families will be expected to do the same.” Ian and I had already decided to enroll Jonty and Brady in school the following year but nonetheless the

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⁶ The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is the ranking used in Australia to gain entry into university courses.
letter left me feeling uneasy – it was uncompromising and final – a bureaucratic directive. The little I knew of the Australian Curriculum indicated that it was very prescriptive, a detailed syllabus of grade-level content. Conversely, home education was, in essence, flexible and individualized. How could I possibly have achieved all that I had with my sons if I had been required to use mandated curriculum? My immediate reaction was that this was not a workable edict – homeschooling and the Australian Curriculum were too fundamentally different. My feeling was that the majority of home educators I knew would need to make wholesale changes to what they were doing (and in doing so, lose much of what makes home education so effective) or that they would ignore the regulations altogether and either fabricate information for their moderator visits or perhaps even deregister as home educators and ‘go underground’. To me, none of these options were really desirable.

With this as a backdrop, I began my Master of Education in order to examine these initial judgments. Had I interpreted regulation changes in a manner indicative of other home educators? Will home educators continue to have the freedoms to legitimately target the interests, strengths and needs of their children the way I was able to do for my sons?

Though a supporter of home education in general, I acknowledge that there is a small minority of home ‘educators’ who do not do well by their children. Such children would actually be better off as one student in a class of 25, subjected to generic content and learning processes. I know of one family with six sons, of whom none can read fluently and two have speech impediments that should have been addressed while they were young enough to respond to treatment. Yet, at no stage have the parents ever been held to account for the poor ‘education’ they offer their children. It is for this reason that I do not consider the removal of all homeschool regulation to be advisable even though this would obviously provide the greatest freedom and flexibility for home educators. I believe that some accountability of home educators is warranted but that it should be flexible enough to allow parents to personalize learning opportunities if they so desire.
Overview of Chapters

Having outlined my homeschooling experiences and thoughts, I will review existing literature in Chapter 2 in order to establish a base of relevant research and develop an understanding of commentary regarding home education methods and outcomes, homeschool regulation and the Australian Curriculum. In Chapter 3, I will detail the methodology and methods utilized to undertake this research. Chapter 4 contains a brief introduction to the thirteen home educating parents interviewed for this thesis. Following this introduction, Chapter 5 contains a synthesis of the conceptions of learning and homeschooling held by these participants – I attempt to determine why they do what they do and the way they do it. From this basis, Chapter 6 specifically explores the response of these parents to the mandated changes in homeschool regulation – what understanding do they have of the new requirements, what are they doing to accommodate these and what are their attitudes to these directives?

The final chapter draws together my preconceptions, the examination of literature and the thoughts of participants in a discussion concerning the function and ideals of homeschool regulation. The literature review which follows seeks to situate the ensuing research.
2. Literature Review

Introduction
This chapter provides an overview of what home education is, why it may be chosen and some of the methods frequently employed in its pursuit. I then give a general comparison of the outcomes of homeschooling to those of conventional schooling as suggested by available research. Following this analysis, I review commentary on the Australian Curriculum and homeschool regulation and consider recent developments in light of the long history of voices calling for school reform.

Home education

The ‘what’ of homeschooling
There is much about homeschooling which is little known or misunderstood. There is not even consensus on its description. Many definitions follow the sentiment that home education is “the education of children within the home setting, independent of the formal schooling context, and usually overseen by parents or other adults significant to the child and family” (Harding & Farrell, 2003, p.125). This definition, like most, specifies the place of learning as the home. Other parties stress that homeschooling is not always conducted in the home but usually involves the supplementary use of community resources and places. One such definition describes home education as “a legal alternative to school education that may adopt a variety of educational approaches all of which embraces learning at home and in the community to provide educational and social opportunities for children” (Allan & Jackson, 2010, p.64). The importance of community to home educators is verified by Barratt-Peacock’s research (2003) which specifically looks at the interaction of homeschooled children with their home, surrounds and community. He describes how each of these ‘spaces’ affords different learning opportunities. Ray (having more than 15 years of close association with home educators when writing) refines this idea further, concluding that homeschooled children tend to spend increasing amounts of time outside the family home as they grow older. Ray states, “The ever-
maturing [homeschooled] child year after year steps out into larger and more expansive spheres of challenge, democratic deliberation and creative service to others” (2000, p.288). Rivero quotes a US regional homeschool coordinator whose experience is this:

…for many, ‘homeschooling’ is really a misnomer because much of their learning is not at home at all. They may be out learning to fly an airplane or building a house. Some homeschoolers travel extensively and others spend time volunteering in the community. They meet and become friends with people of all ages. Home may be your base, but the ‘classroom’ can be anywhere (2008, p.23).

The ‘how’ of homeschooling
If there is some disparity in the perception of what home education is, there is even more so in how it is practised. Jackson and Allan (2010) provide a detailed table of six different methods used by home educators ranging from school-like, structured systems through to ‘unschooling’ or ‘natural’ approaches. Stuart Chapman, a long-time home educator and now director of HomeSchool WA, believes the most popular method of homeschooling in Australia is the eclectic approach followed by natural learning methods then predetermined curriculum options (Chapman, 2012). As well as a great diversity of methods across the breadth of the homeschooling community, several studies show that individual families tend to change their methods over time, often transitioning from structured to less formal approaches (Allan & Jackson, 2010; Morton, 2010; Patterson et al., 2007; Reilly in Wight, 2007; Thomas, 1998).

Unschooling
Unschooling, also known as natural or autonomous learning, is worthy of explicit examination as it is the least school-like method of homeschooling and, as such, will likely be at greatest odds with attempts to standardize the delivery of education.

The overwhelming majority of children who attend school on their first day, do so having already attained functional language, the rudiments of literacy and numeracy
and a great deal of cultural understanding (Thomas & Pattison, 2013). These have been acquired over four or five years of unstructured learning predominantly from their home environments. This informal learning has been achieved at their own pace from *ad hoc* occurrences in daily life. Unschooling can simply be viewed as a “continuation of the acculturation which all children experience from birth and through their early years” (Thomas & Pattison, 2013, p.150). Unschooling is learning embedded into everyday experiences – informal, implicit and incidental. It is ‘natural’ in that it removes the use of predetermined, decontextualized content. As discussed earlier (p.14), this does not imply that all learning will be done at home – it will often involve outings to shops, friends’ homes, libraries, community events, appointments and family holidays and will usually incorporate a wide variety of resources and a diverse range of media. Thomas and Pattison conducted in-depth interviews with 26 natural learning homeschooling families and determined that informal learning methods are efficient and effective, if not fully appreciated or understood. They affirm that the “unremarkable dribs and drabs” acquisition of knowledge and skills provides children with a foundation for adulthood and for later formal studies on par with mainstream schooling, though with a great deal less structure and striving (2013, p.149). This appeared true, even regarding the attainment of higher level cognitive skills such as reflection.

Whether or not the unschooling approach is chosen, homeschooling is essentially a different form of education. It is “not just school in another place” (Barratt-Peacock, 2003, p.101). Rivero further asserts, “Very few homeschoolers desire to make their homes a school. That would defeat their reasons for homeschooling!” (2008, p.78) There are many qualities associated with home education which are not readily available in traditional classrooms. Individualization of instruction, close personal relationships, flexibility of schedules and resources, opportunities for conversation, for community service, for travel and for student autonomy are just some traits of homeschooling which may be used to varying degrees by families. Time and space prevent me from examining every feature available to home educators, so I will consider the three which I believe are most relevant to this research – individualized
instruction, conversational learning and situated learning. I stress that, while these attributes are potentially available to all home educators, there is no uniformity in how, or to what extent, they are employed.

**Individualized instruction**
There has long been recognition of the need to individualize education. Chastain (1975) refers to dozens of studies with this finding dating back to the Depression (1929-1932). Good and Brophy (1987) assert that private individualized tutoring is the preferred method of most teaching, whenever circumstances permit, as it allows content and method to be customized to the student. Because of its labour intensiveness and expense this is no longer the usual mode of teaching but, even today, someone wanting to learn a musical instrument will, if at all possible, receive individual tuition. This allows pieces to be targeted at just the right level of difficulty; areas of weakness to be addressed as they arise; single pieces or even just small sections to be repeated as necessary until they are mastered; theory to be taught and practised concurrently. Teaching in this context is targeted, relevant and responsive; learning opportunities are optimized. Once the rudiments are learned, it is then possible to participate in the broader context of a band or orchestra. Being able to personalize a child’s education likewise permits constant monitoring and modification which facilitates problem resolution ensuring that learning is relevant and consistent with a student’s situation and character (Chastain, 1975).

Homeschooling is the educational type which most readily facilitates harmonizing a specialized curriculum with a child’s particular talents and needs (Aurini & Davies, 2005). Ray sees home-based education essentially as “private individualized tutoring” (2000, p.275) and J. Michael Smith (President of the US Home School Legal Defence Association) calls individualized instruction the “genius of home education” that “allows parents to treat learning as a much broader, more holistic endeavour than public schools, which are typically constrained by fixed standards, mandated texts and unyielding demands of ‘curriculum coverage’” (cited in Kunzman, 2009, p.316).
The characteristically low student-to-teacher ratio of homeschooling is a significant factor in creating opportunities for responsive and personalized attention. Duvall, a school psychologist, worked with both conventionally schooled and homeschooled children for over two decades and conducted two lengthy studies comparing the outcomes of disabled students in the two systems. On the basis of this research he argues that the most important principle linked with academic success is the availability of ‘Academic Engaged Time’ (AET), that is, the time in which a student is actively engaging with and responding to academic tasks. He quotes eleven studies, most not focused on students with disabilities, which support his conclusion that on-task engagement is of singular importance to academic success (Duvall, 2005).

Throughout his research, Duvall observed that AET was consistently much higher in home education situations that in public schools (for example, in one study he recorded 59.3% of AET in homeschools compared to 25.1% in mainstream schools (Klicka, 2009)). He attributes this largely to the low student-to-teacher ratio.

In addition to having low student numbers, home educators can also target content of relevance or interest to a child, a strategy known to enhance student engagement (Chastain, 1975; Kohn, 2004; McLaughlin & Blank, 2004). McLaughlin and Blank add:

This is true across all ability levels and grades…If we are serious about leaving no child behind, we must present the content that young people need to meet high standards in a context that has meaning and relevance in their everyday lives (p.34).

It is common knowledge that capturing a student’s interest increases their motivation and facilitates learning. Many experts agree with this as Rotgans and Schmidt (2014, p.38) affirm: “there is a general consensus among interest researchers that situational interest positively affects student learning and knowledge attainment.” Hidi is one such interest researcher who has extensively explored the topic from a neuroscientific viewpoint. She maintains that interest is central to motivation, learning and performance for students (Hidi, 2006). Hidi distinguishes between individual interest as a person’s predisposition toward a specific topic and situational
interest being a more temporary curiosity of the task at hand. For the purposes of this study, I will not differentiate between the two but refer to a source of interest loosely as any content which is valued either intrinsically or extrinsically by a student. Hidi found that interest positively influences attention and persistence on a task, retention of knowledge, efficiency in learning and encourages higher level thinking. In addition, research indicates that a student with “low ability and/or perceptual disabilities” can achieve success using their established interests (Hidi, 2006, p.78). Based on her many years of research, Hidi makes this recommendation:

> Accepting the existing neuroscientific evidence that we are ‘prewired’, so to speak, to experience interest as an emotion and the feelings of interest as a motivator of our behaviours, suggests that our brain reacts specifically when it encounters interesting content. Thus, *eliciting and utilizing interest in educational settings should be a major focus of educators* (2006, p.77, emphasis mine).

Willingham (2009), also a neuroscientist, believes that choosing content to pique interest is important but material must also be relevant to a child and pitched at a level which is challenging but achievable. There is growing evidence that a student’s learning is maximized when information is delivered at a level just above his or her current ability – not too hard, not too easy (Willingham, 2009). However, recent research indicates that, in any given school year, there will be approximately five to six years difference in the achievement levels of the most advanced and the least advanced students (Masters, 2011) and that only about fifteen percent of students actually perform at their year level (Glines, 2012). In any standard classroom, then, it is next to impossible for a teacher to provide an optimum level of instruction across the board. Parents, however, who know their children intimately and are not working with large numbers of students, are well positioned to customize the delivery of learning experiences at this ‘just above’ level. Further to this, evidence suggests that parents are capable of skillfully guiding their children from initial understandings to mastering more difficult concepts by providing them with transitional support (Pino-Pasternak, Whitebread & Tolmie, 2010).
Another important aspect of homeschooling which facilitates personalized instruction is the inherent flexibility in scheduling. Rivero places a high value on this freedom:

One of the unique benefits of homeschooling that money can’t buy…is
time: time to work slowly, time to think, time to focus on a single idea rather than multi-tasking, time for self-knowledge and reflection, time to question the world and wait for the answers (2008, p.64).

Time, with regards to learning, is also a factor esteemed by Good & Brophy (1987). They expound the notion of ‘mastery learning’ which presumes that the majority of students are capable of learning any parcel of knowledge if given enough time to do so. This is in stark contrast to the “fixed time, variable learning” ethos indicative of most school systems (Christensen, Horn & Johnson, 2011, p.110). Studies show that achievement levels in mastery learning classes are higher than for conventional approaches (Good & Brophy, 1987) but that it is impractical in most classrooms because of the need to hold faster students back or engage them in alternate work (this is exacerbated by high student-to-teacher ratios, absenteeism and student movement between schools). There are, however, none of these difficulties with homeschooling where work can progress at whatever pace is suitable for the student – tasks can be accelerated or repeated as many times as needed.

Time is also central to the philosophy of “Better late than early” developed by Dr. Raymond Moore and his wife, Dorothy. Moore is considered by some to be the father of the modern homeschool movement in America. He was a teacher, principal and superintendent of Californian public schools who later turned to educational research (Moore Home Schooling, n.d.). On the basis of this research, the Moores wrote the book, Better Late than Early: A new approach to your child’s education (1975) which primarily asserts that children should not be submitted to formal education until the age of 8 or 10 when they have usually reached sufficient maturation. Until such time, the Moores advocate that parents read and sing and play with their children and involve them fully in family life. This concept of readiness recurs throughout much of homeschooling literature. It is also worth noting that
Finland and Estonia, who both consistently achieve high PISA results, begin compulsory education at age 7 – one or two years after virtually all other European nations (European Commission, Eurydice, 2014/2015).

Conversational learning
Conversational learning, also called ‘instructional conversation’ has been defined as “a dialogue between teacher and learners in which the teacher listens carefully to grasp the students’ communicative intent, and tailors the dialogue to meet the emerging understanding of the learners” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991, abstract). Tharp and Gallimore see this as “the fundamental, natural method of teaching” and refer to it as ‘authentic’ and ‘true’ teaching. Walsh and Li (2013) consider conversational learning in a classroom context and explain that, by making small adjustments to their practices such as allowing for longer wait-times and encouraging extended turns, teachers can achieve considerable enrichment in both the quality and quantity of learning opportunities in their classes. They acknowledge, however, that such questioning is rare in the majority of classrooms where teachers generally do the bulk of talking punctuated by low-level questioning designed to seek immediate, short, rote responses. This tends to promote student passiveness, they argue. Tharp and Gallimore (1991) implore school leaders to reorganize schools to accommodate more instructional conversation. Potential benefits are substantial as conversation provides a vehicle for students to explore and refine ideas in a non-threatening, shared environment (Riedinger, 2012; Walsh & Li, 2013).

Dialogic teaching, exploratory talk and sustained shared thinking are similar concepts which have emerged and gained recognition through classroom research in recent decades (Alexander, 2008; Littleton et al., 2005; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Though subtly different, each incorporates the perception that learning, developed through the active and collaborative use of discussion, is of immense educational value. Michaels, O’Connor and Resnick (2008) list nineteen studies conducted between 1992 and 2006 which demonstrate that learning through conversation is critically important in a child’s education, particularly in the early years.
One important advantage of conversational learning is that it facilitates formative feedback (Bellamy & Woolsey, 1998). Formative feedback is defined as “information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behavior to improve learning” (Shute, 2008). Quality feedback can increase students’ confidence, lead to greater investment in effort (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and assist in amalgamation of the cognitive, affective and motivational domains of learning, thus enhancing learning practices and outcomes (Shute, 2008). Effective feedback should take into consideration prior learning, the context of instruction, the individual characteristics of the learner and the difficulty of the task, and should be immediate in some circumstances (Black & Wiliam in Fenwick & Cooper, 2012; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008).

Homeschooling, with its traditionally small numbers of children and relaxed schedules, can readily provide opportunities for individual, contextual and timely feedback. Thomas (1994, p.139) explicitly examines the use of conversational learning in home education settings. He concludes:

> Once children start school the opportunity to learn through dialogue is dramatically curtailed… but indications are that there could be a substantial increase in the quality and quantity of learning if older children… had regular one-to-one access to a mentor.

Thomas concludes that his research, based on the input of 100 homeschooling families in Australia and the United Kingdom, strongly suggests that the success generally attained by homeschooled students can largely be attributed to the prevalence of conversational learning and that this is achieved “with far less ‘on task’ application than is routinely required in the classroom” (Thomas, 1994, p.139). This may be because, in addition to feedback, small group conversation affords a learner some measure of autonomy in the exploration of a topic and permits the use of instructional scaffolding so that information may be presented at a ‘just right’ level (Riedinger, 2012; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991; Walsh & Li, 2013). Also, a parent can readily draw on shared experiences to help make sense of new situations and indulge in long, detailed and fluid conversations. Such unscripted dialogue has immense

**Situated learning**

In addition to the advantages of conversational learning and personalized education, homeschooling is usually characterized by some degree of situated learning (also known as contextual learning). Situated learning (with its roots in Vygotskian theory) involves the idea of learning taking place within context. It involves learning through participation (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Kemp, 2010; Sadler, 2009) and “a shift in focus from teaching to learning” (Machles, 2003, p.23).

There are considerable benefits to this approach. First, it is more likely to produce deep and enduring learning than more theoretical approaches (Brown et al., 1989). Second, situated learning is often related to a child’s natural interests bringing with it all the benefits discussed earlier (pp.18/19). Third, because it is based on authentic, real-life experiences, situated learning is easily legitimized in the eyes of the student; it ensures that knowledge has meaning and purpose. This is aptly demonstrated in the research of Miller and Gildea (cited in Brown et al., 1989) which investigated the acquisition of vocabulary words from real world situations compared to arbitrarily assigned words from a dictionary. Words learned in context were remembered, used and readily transferred. Words learned theoretically were often irrelevant and not easily put into practice, and when they were used, were frequently applied incorrectly. Brown et al. (1989) argue that it is quite possible to acquire a parcel of knowledge but be unable to use it. Yet, the procurement of formal, decontextualized knowledge is a dominant feature of conventional schooling.

Just-in-time learning, closely linked to situated learning, occurs when information is provided at the point of need. Students learn best when answers are sought as questions arise, when interest is heightened (Warschauer, 2007). It is making use of
'teachable moments' (Holtrop, 1996; Warschauer, 2007). The prevalence of the internet has revolutionized this form of learning and now empowers families in their homes to obtain expert knowledge on virtually any subject as needed.

Homeschooling, with its characteristically low student-to-teacher ratios and notably reduced timetabling constraints, easily accommodates both situated learning and just-in-time learning. In the course of daily living, children frequently seek deeper knowledge of something they have observed or heard or participated in. In a homeschool setting parents can readily change the focus of their teaching to facilitate the pursuit of a point of interest or an answer to a pressing question. In a very real sense then, students become apprentice learners who learn ‘on the job’ (Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this way, as for conversational learning, learning becomes a collaborative process.

The ‘why’ of homeschooling
The reasons parents choose home education are as many and varied as the practices they use. Consequently, commentators have no consistent way of grouping home educators with reference to their motivations. Some observers, however, have suggested that home educators were traditionally categorized into two distinct groups - Wasley (2007) defines these groups as “religious fundamentalists” and “hemp-wearing hippies” and similar terms have been used by Kunzman (2012), Morton (2010), Ray (2005) and Reich (2005) – but that these traditional distinctions have become increasingly blurred over the last two decades. Aurini and Davies (2005) specifically looked at the motivations of homeschooling parents compared to those of other private education options and concluded that this expansion in the breadth of homeschooling has been prompted by the generalized societal push for greater choice and individualized options.

Lubienski (2008) distinguishes between home educators who choose it as a superior approach and those who have been forced to homeschool due to social, economic or geographical reasons. Morton (2010) terms this last group ‘last resort’ but divides
those who voluntarily opt for homeschooling into ‘natural’ (choosing for lifestyle considerations) and ‘social’ (choosing for moral and social reasons). Harding (cited in Harding & Farrell, 2003) and Ray (cited in Ray, 2000) both give lists of six specific, though differing, reasons home education is chosen. Given motives include: assurance of academic success, individualized teaching and learning, enhanced family relationships, guided social interactions with peers and adults, transmission of particular worldviews/religious beliefs, sense of responsibility for children’s education, child safety and special education or health needs. Whatever the specific reasons, commentators agree that all parents choose home education primarily because they believe that, in present circumstances, it is in the best interests of their child (Barrett-Peacock, 2003; Cooper & Sureau, 2007; Jackson, 2007; Jackson & Allan, 2010; Kunzman, 2009; Patterson et al., 2007).

While there are many positive reasons given for choosing home education, circumventing negative effects of mainstream schooling is also identified as contributing to some parents’ decisions (Harding & Farrell, 2003; Jackson & Allan, 2010; Varnham, 2008). Perceived problems of classroom education include the anti-social behaviour of peers (including bullying), the values of parents not being upheld and deficiencies in curriculum, resources and services of accessible schools (Jackson & Allan, 2010; Varnham, 2008).

The outcomes of homeschooling
Just how successful is home education? There are over twenty years of research in Australia extolling homeschooling as an effective alternative to mainstream schooling (Jackson, 2012). In terms of academic achievement, studies show that homeschooled students, in general, achieve as well or better than their schooled peers – Harding and Farrell (2003) list thirteen separate studies which make this claim. Jackson (2012) makes similar assertions based on eight Australian studies which were either small-scale or observed the performance of homeschooled children in passing. She interprets this lack of in-depth Australian research as a general absence of concern or curiosity regarding the academic outcomes of Australian homeschooled students.
(Jackson, 2009). Homeschool sceptics (Apple, 2005; Lubienski, 2000; Reich, 2005; West, 2009) rightly point out that achievement tests are commonly taken from unrepresentative, usually self-selected, samples of homeschooled children which detracts from the credibility of any conclusions. But the most damming criticism that Reich (2005, p.115), an outspoken critic of homeschooling, can voice is that, “we have no evidence to suggest that it fails.”

There is evidence that, academically, Australian homeschool graduates are easily transitioning between home education and institutional schools (Jackson, 2007; Thomas, 1998). My own experience is that my sons had no trouble academically when they entered formal schooling in India. Back in Australia, my eldest son completed secondary studies as Dux of his year (2012) and my second son graduated as runner-up Dux in 2014 (beaten by a student who was also educated at home until entering school in Year 11). Both these sons have attained university entrance into their preferred courses. Jackson (2007) cites six overseas studies which concur that, in general, homeschooled children are readily achieving places in tertiary institutions or the workforce and appear to adjust well.

Special needs children have been singled out as positively benefiting from home education (Allan & Jackson, 2010; Duvall, 2005; Klicka, 2009; Reilly in Jackson & Allan, 2010; Wight, 2007). Duvall, as mentioned previously, conducted two extensive studies comparing home education and mainstream schooling for children with special needs. He determined that children undertaking home education outperformed or achieved on par with those attending public schools, even those enrolled in special education programs (Wight, 2007).

Evidence suggests that other groups who are traditionally disadvantaged in public schools also fare much better when homeschooled (Ray, 2009). For example, there is

7 Dux- Derived from the same latin word as ‘Duke’, meaning ‘leader’, the Dux is “The person with the highest academic rank in their cohort” (Urban Dictionary, 2005). Similar to the concept of ‘valedictorian’. 

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a well-established correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement (Ahmar & Anwar, 2013; Caro, 2009; Cobbold, 2010; Fenwick, 2011; Perry & McConney, 2010; Sirin, 2005) which is not evident to any significant degree in homeschooling communities (Jeynes, 2012; Ray, 2009). African American students have also experienced a persistent and well-documented achievement gap which is not apparent in homeschooling contexts (Lundy & Mazama, 2014; Taylor, 2005).

Academic achievement is just one aspect of success, however. Documented benefits of homeschooling include the opportunity for more holistic education, reduced peer pressure, greater student autonomy, promotion of cohesive family relationships, the availability of quiet spaces where students can focus and pursue meaningful goals and for harmony between content, methods and family culture (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Harding & Farrell, 2003; Jackson, 2007; Kunzman, 2012; Meighan, 2000; Ray, 2000). In addition to these it is purported that students greatly benefit from the vertically-aged social structure typically associated with homeschooling (Jackson, 2009; Jackson & Allan, 2010; Rivero, 2008) and that homeschooled students generally have a healthier than normal sense of self-worth (Harding & Farrell, 2003; Jackson & Allan, 2010). Taking this research as a whole, there is evidence to suggest that home education generally serves its recipients well, though this is entirely dependent on the practices of individual families.

At this point, it is worth addressing two common areas of concern. Duvall (2005) asserts that the major criticisms aimed at home educators relate to socialization and teaching expertise. It is frequently put to home educators that restricted socialization opportunities negatively affects their children. Allan and Jackson (2010) establish that there is no research to support the concept that Australian homeschooled children are socially deprived. Further to this, Jackson (2007) cites five overseas studies which similarly refute this perception. Perhaps the most telling study to this end is that conducted by seven American researchers, all either professors of education or school administrators. All seven admitted holding negative preconceptions regarding homeschooling but found, after completing their
research, that the families they interviewed were “not the socially isolated people they are often portrayed” (Patterson et al., 2007, p.78). On the contrary, home educators often undertake collaborative learning with other families, exchange areas of expertise for mutual benefit and frequently participate in sporting, musical and community groups and even graduation ceremonies and balls (Duvall, 2005; Pannapacker, 2005; Patterson et al., 2007; Rivero, 2008).

There is likewise a dearth of evidence that parents without teaching qualifications teach their children poorly. Rather, Duvall (2005), with over two decades of experience as a school psychologist, observed that homeschooling parents typically engaged in the same teaching behaviours (such as academic talking and questioning) as certified teachers and that this was independent of a parent’s level of education. Indeed, the most remarkable academic progress he witnessed was achieved by a boy who was educated by his mother after two years of abject failure in a public school. Yet, neither of the boy’s parents had gone beyond the 11th grade. Furthermore, it was my experience, as a teacher-cum-home educator that much of my teacher training was largely irrelevant or even obstructive to teaching at home – teacher training is largely concerned (rightly) with preparing teachers for situations where group dynamics are paramount. Rivero (2008, p.182) sums up this idea when she notes: “For one-on-one learning, the most important qualifications are a willingness to find and do whatever works best and a deep knowledge of the learner. In these qualifications, parents are the experts, regardless of their degrees or certifications.”

A summary of homeschooling
Home education provides a smorgasbord of methods and experiences from which a child’s education can be individually constructed to meet their needs, interests, talents and goals. This array of options arises largely due to the intrinsically small numbers of children involved and the ensuing flexibilities in where and when learning experiences can occur. Furthermore, parents are invested in each child’s education and committed to their successful transition into the adult world and beyond.
Homeschooling is chosen for many reasons, though a growing number seem to be turning to home education after mainstream options have become untenable. It is accepted, however, that the predominant motivation for homeschooling is a parent’s belief that it is in the best interest of their child. Research suggests that home educated children achieve at higher than expected levels, particularly children with special needs or from low socioeconomic backgrounds or minority cultures.

Having considered the nature of home education and parents’ motivations for its selection, I will now attend to literature focused on the Australian Curriculum and prescribed curricula in general. Once I have established a collective understanding of these, I will integrate the two and investigate current Western Australian home education regulation.

**Prescribed curriculum**

**The Australian Curriculum**

In Western Australia, the Curriculum Framework was the predecessor to the Australian Curriculum. It was mandated for use by all Western Australian schools and homeschooled so, strictly speaking, home education regulation in Western Australia has been “strongly prescriptive” since that time (Varnham, 2008, p.18). However, the Curriculum Framework exemplified a remarkably conciliatory, student-centred approach to education. In the foreword of the text, Colin Barnett, the then Minister of Education, states, “Rather than being prescriptive about what must be taught, the Curriculum Framework will be used by schools to develop and implement their teaching and learning programs according to the needs and characteristics of their students” (Curriculum Council, 1998, p.3).

In 2013, the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) developed the Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline (the Outline) based on the Australian Curriculum – both documents share a substantial amount of detail and it has been explicitly stated that the Outline will be updated as the Australian Curriculum is completed (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014a). For
this reason, I will use the terms ‘Australian Curriculum’ and ‘Outline’ interchangeably. Indeed, in the letter sent to home educators at the start of the 2014 school year (see Appendix B), both terms are used to refer to the newly introduced mandatory curriculum in Western Australia. This letter was titled, “Transitioning to the Australian Curriculum: Guidelines for Home Education 2014” and states, “SCSA has advised that all educational programs, including home education programs, must reflect the Outline’s content, general capabilities and achievement standards.”

Many criticisms have been aimed at the Australian curriculum – it is inflexible, overcrowded, assessment focused, economically and politically driven, homogenized, concentrated on coverage of content rather than quality of learning, reducing teacher autonomy, decontextualized, likely to further ostracize already marginalized students and rushed in with little meaningful consultation (Atweh & Singh, 2011; Brennan, 2011; Ditchburn, 2012a; Ditchburn, 2012b; Drummond, 2012; Ewing, 2012; Garrett & Piltz, 1999; Hannan, 2010; Reid, 1999; Thomson, 1999; Yates & Collins, 2010). For example, Garrett and Piltz (1999, p.209) in analysing early drafts of the Australian Curriculum write:

…many teachers feel that this curriculum imposition has constrained their capacity to act as autonomous professionals. In their view, they have been asked to implement a flawed curriculum ‘product’, the scope of which is so broad as to make it difficult to cover any aspect in any real depth.

The recent Australian Curriculum Review confirmed that it was, indeed, overcrowded but conversely identifies some gaps in content. It was also confirmed that the Australian Curriculum needed to be more inclusive (Australia. Department of Education, 2014b). While all these curricula defects are likely to impact the homeschooling community to some degree, I will principally focus on issues of content after first briefly discussing the potential for the Australian Curriculum to be an instrument of inequality.

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8 Original emphasis.
The issue of inequality in the Australian Curriculum is significant for three reasons – because attempts to improve the outcomes of students who have traditionally done poorly at school is purported to be a primary justification for developing a national curriculum (Fenwick & Cooper, 2012; Gatto, 1992; Roberts, 2013); because marginalized students are turning to homeschooling in increasing numbers (as I will discuss in ‘The need for educational alternatives’ (pp.43/44)) and because curricula choice does affect educational equity (Atweh & Singh, 2011; Ewing, 2012; Reid, 1999; Reid & Johnson, 1999; Thomson, 1999).

The Australian Curriculum affirms the importance of delivering educational programs which meet individual students’ needs. For example, it speaks of “every student’s entitlement to rigorous, relevant and engaging learning experiences across all areas of the curriculum” (Australian Curriculum, n.d. b). However, it then stipulates that teachers can only meet their obligations by applying the Australian Curriculum “to every student across all educational settings and contexts without exception” (Australian Curriculum, n.d. c). This last statement follows a flowchart diagramming the “three-dimensional design” which incorporates general capabilities and/or cross-curriculum priorities into the syllabus. What is the three-dimensional process which ensures the entitlement of every child to “personalised learning” experiences that “respond to their needs and interests”? The process, we are informed, starts by choosing some point on the fixed syllabus at the students’ chronological age. Vertical adjustment can then be made if needed by choosing a different point from the syllabus above or below the students’ age level. Lastly, some horizontal latitude is granted by permitting use of two other predetermined entities – the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities. In effect, this is like taking someone to a supermarket and letting them choose anything they want from any shelf – as long as they get it from the canned food aisle! Perhaps one or two other items may be added from adjoining aisles – if they can be justified. Furthermore, Regulations 42(1) – 42(3) of the Australian Education Act 2013, ties school funding to the use of the Australian Curriculum (or a recognized equivalent) in teaching, assessing and reporting (Australia. Department of Education, 2014a). This ensures that a teacher making use
of this limited freedom must still equip his/her students to pass standardized tests on
the age-related materials of the prescribed syllabus. And all this must be done in the
case of an already overcrowded syllabus. Is this really providing “flexibility for
schools and teachers to ‘promote personalised learning that aims to fulfil the diverse
capabilities of each young Australian’”? (Australian Curriculum, n.d. a).

The flexibilities in school autonomy which are actually available seem to be restricted
to the ‘how’ of teaching programs with very little room for movement in the ‘what’.  

With regard to early Australian Curriculum policy, Thomson (1999, p.36) observes:

What is available for teacher action and negotiation with students is how
the content is to be learned, not the content itself... Whether they see
the designated learning outcomes as relevant, interesting, insulting or
inequitable is not up for question.

Both these assertions are echoed in more recent policy documents:

The Australian Curriculum makes clear to teachers what is to be taught. It
also makes clear to students what they should learn and the quality of
learning expected of them. Schools are able to decide how best to deliver
the curriculum, drawing on integrated approaches where appropriate and
using pedagogical approaches that account for students’ needs, interests
and the school and community context (Australian Curriculum,
Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012).

In the version of the (frequently changing) Australian Curriculum website available in
February 2015, declarations of freedom in method of delivery have now been
replaced with lists detailing some two dozen ‘approaches’ from which a teacher may
choose (Australian Curriculum, n.d. d). It appears, then, that this area of flexibility is
also being tightened. Choice of content, remains firmly ‘off the table’ as, in amongst
these lists, it is restated: “In all of these examples, the integrity of the learning area
content must be retained.”

32
Standardizing curriculum and methods narrows the relevance of curriculum to students and shuts teachers out of curricula decision, impeding teachers’ abilities to respond to students’ needs (Cobb, Sargent & Patchen, 2012).

Research has clearly shown that issues of educational inequality are best tackled at the local level of the school and classroom by teachers actively engaged in diagnosing learning difficulties and adapting curriculum to suit the needs of specific cohorts of students (Atweh & Singh, 2011, p.190).

For example, Wilson and Alloway (2013) demonstrated that it was possible to actively engage marginalized students in science learning in three rural Victorian schools but that this required significant mediation of curriculum by teachers. As Holmes wrote over a century ago, “What is exceptional and experimental cannot possibly find a place in a syllabus which is to bind all schools and all teachers alike…” (1912, p.105).

Prior to both the Curriculum Framework and the Australian Curriculum, the Curriculum Development Centre was established to counsel the Australian states regarding core curriculum. In 1980 they produced Core Curriculum for Australian Schools: What it is and why it is needed. In it they celebrate the recent departure from prescribed curriculum by all Australian states and specifically declare that:

It is not for the Centre to determine detailed curriculum content and teaching methods, or to prescribe syllabuses and texts. These are the responsibility of many different authorities and groups throughout the country, not least the teachers, parents and students in the schools.

(Curriculum Development Centre, 1980, p.5).

They later reiterate, “It is only the school that can develop curricula which meet the individual and varying needs of students” (p.13). They justify this position based on the need to account for local circumstances, the increasing diversity of students and the variation in availability of resources and teacher expertise. Moreover, those at the Curriculum Development Centre seem to have anticipated recent reforms with apprehension as they state:
Because individual schools have the responsibility and need to adjust curricula to local circumstances, community interests and the differing learning requirements and characteristics of students, it would be a mistake to attempt to present the core as a set of required learnings which could be tested through a national or State testing program⁹…This would be…a most retrogressive step, likely to narrow teaching unduly and hinder the development of curricula which engage the interests and energies of young people. There are better ways of maintaining educational standards and having schools account to society than requiring all students to sit for externally devised tests (pp.15/16).

If it would be a mistake to devise a prescribed syllabus for core concepts, would it not then be considered a blunder of sizable proportions to mandate a detailed K-10 syllabus for all subjects? Those at the Curriculum Development Centre could foresee this error in 1980, and there are other voices that have also been cautioning Australian educational authorities against standardized reforms. In the following section, I will consider the outcomes of the national curriculum in England, the United States and Finland and then consider commentary regarding the Australian Curriculum applied to rural settings.

Experiences of mandated curriculum

England
At this point it is useful to note the British experience. Primary Curriculum Futures¹⁰ by Conroy, Hulme and Menter (2008), provides interesting insight into individualized instruction in the context of a national curriculum. The introduction reveals a national curriculum in trouble – it has been thirty years since its inception throughout

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⁹ Original emphasis.

¹⁰ Conroy, Hulme and Menter are academics from the University of Glasgow who have been commissioned by the University of Cambridge to make an independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary schools in England. This particular report is one of a series of 32 which are based on thirty specially-commissioned surveys.
England, it has undergone a series of modifications and is now in need of a complete overhaul to such an extent that policy makers are turning to alternative methods of education for inspiration. The authors see a need to move away from the current “limitations of curricular prescription” (p.2). Of note is the observation that, “the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2005) has argued that ‘changes in society and the nature of work, combined with advances in technology and new understandings about learning, require a more responsive pedagogy with greater opportunities for the personalization of learning’” (p.3, emphasis mine). This call is not new, with some commentators suggesting much earlier that the national curriculum should be decluttered so that no more than 50 percent of students’ time is engaged in prescribed learning, allowing for local differences and individual choice (Moon & Mortimore, 1989). Moon and Mortimore theorize that a national curriculum “should provide a framework and not be a straight jacket” (p.16).

Conroy et al. (2008) examine a number of educational alternatives, including homeschooling, all of which appear to be thriving and all of which are considered child-centred with a significant degree of teacher and/or student autonomy. They conclude that a re-thinking of curriculum is warranted and that flexibility needs to be at the heart of curriculum development.

There are many parallels between the introduction of the national curriculum in Britain and that in Australia. Both result from a strengthening of influence by the central government (Briant & Doherty, 2012); the ideology of both is described using market language; both focus on performance assessment and both claim to be preparing young people as citizens of the future (Ditchburn, 2012a; Conroy et al., 2008). Both view curriculum as fixed parcels of information, students as passive collectors of knowledge and teachers as ‘quasi-professionals’ (Conroy et al., 2008; Ditchburn, 2012a; Garrett & Pilz, 1999). Most significantly here, both are characterized by rigid, prescriptive curriculum (Ditchburn, 2012a; Conroy et al., 2008). With so many underpinning similarities, it is reasonable to expect the Australian Curriculum to crystallize in a manner comparable to that in Britain. A
significant difference, however, is that privately funded educators in England (including home educators) are exempt from practising the national curriculum and have not been forced down the same path as the largely waning government schools. Alternative schooling exists as a strong and successful sector to which researchers such as Conroy and colleagues can turn for ideas that may enhance, if not rescue, the ailing school system. If Australian state governments insist on imposing the Australian Curriculum on the entire educational system and our national curriculum produces similar outcomes to its British counterpart, to whom will our researchers turn for help? And what will be the expense to those who could have enjoyed much more meaningful learning opportunities?

**The USA**
American schools are subject to a varied mix of federal, state and district mandates. Part of these reforms has been driven by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policies effective since 2002. These mandates include curricula requirements, recurrent classroom assessments and standardized testing (Cobb, Sargent & Patchen, 2012) which have led to situations where “teachers describe how they have struggled to maintain effective best practices within this ‘pressure cooker’ accountability culture” (Cobb et al., 2012, p.112). Cobb and colleagues draw on several larger studies of school mandates in America as well as conducting their own interviews, specifically with literacy resource teachers. They describe the consequences of this push for accountability-driven reform as “monumental” (p.112) and that, regardless of the specific mandates, teachers were significantly affected at every level. They found that teachers described being impacted in two specific ways: they felt restricted in their choice of material to meet students’ needs and many inevitably felt pressured to abandon innovative teaching practices and teach ‘to the test’, thus narrowing their instructional practices. Time restrictions caused by the extent of curriculum coverage were also a factor in restricting methods to more teacher-directed techniques. It is interesting to note that Cobb and colleagues witnessed a variety of levels of compliance to mandates – from full implementation to ‘outward compliance’ involving a substantial degree of modification by the teacher. Those who did use
their own judgment in applying mandates did so on the basis that they had detailed knowledge of their students and what was best for them. It is also interesting to observe that all the teachers interviewed, even those who fully complied, believed that fixed curriculum forced them away from best teaching practices. It was perceived that there were many factors (such as the style of school administration) which determined the strictness with which mandates were enforced. The dilemma faced by the teachers in their research (to comply with mandates or to tailor learning experiences to their students’ needs despite mandates) is very similar to that described by Briant and Doherty of Australian teachers in their article *Teacher educators mediating curricular reform: anticipating the Australian Curriculum* (2012).

**Finland**

Finland’s education system first attracted international attention in 2001 when it topped the rankings in the first PISA survey (OECD, 2011). It has continued to perform highly in each subsequent round of testing. In addition, the variation between high and low-achieving students is “extraordinarily modest” placing it among the top nations for educational equality (OECD, 2011, p.118). While some observers identify possible non-educational explanations such as the relatively low immigrant population, general consensus considers Finland’s education system to be largely responsible for these consistently high results (Finland. Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.).

Finland has a national curriculum which is promoted and enforced by the central government. However, it is a core curriculum, quite different from the national curricula of Australia and the United Kingdom. As stated earlier (p.21), Finland has a later-than-usual starting age for compulsory schooling. Also, children may cease schooling at age 16, after only nine years (Ruzzi, 2005). Furthermore, Finnish students have less contact hours than those of most other countries so that, by the time they are 15 years old, they typically have the equivalent of three years less schooling (OECD, 2011); and Finnish students don’t receive homework (Westerberg, 2014). These are remarkable characteristics for such a highly successful system.
The question must then be asked, “What is learning like when Finnish students are at school?” Literature suggests that Finnish schools are purposefully learner-centred with an emphasis on self-assessment and collaborative, cross-curricular projects (OECD, 2011). These are guided by a flexible core curriculum which “functions more as a framework” (OECD, 2011, p. 123) than a directive, allowing teachers considerable latitude in what and how they teach. Teachers are actively encouraged to engage in curricula development to ensure the success of every student and are supported by a comprehensive network to identify and assist struggling students early, before problems become entrenched (OECD, 2011). This all occurs in an environment in which classroom assessing is ongoing but external testing is limited to sampling designed to monitor the operation of the broader education system – there is no centralized mechanism for assessing a school’s performance.

Finland is able to provide this child-centred and highly successful education system without excessive spending. In fact, in real terms, Australia spends considerably more per student on core educational services than does Finland11 (OECD, 2012).

**Rural Australia**

Rural schools are different to other types of Australian schools (Roberts, 2013) – like homeschools, they are a small subset of the broader education system with a higher prevalence of multi-grade teaching, generally lower than normal student-to-teacher ratios and are more likely to experience difficulty in accessing specific resources (Drummond, 2012). In the context of standardized curriculum and testing, where nationwide comparison of all students is inevitable, it is doubtful whether rural schools will be equipped to favourably compete with their urban counterparts (Drummond, 2012). This, and the many characteristics shared with home education, validates a specific, albeit brief, consideration of the possible effects of the Australian Curriculum on this schooling type.

11 In 2009, across all educational sectors Australia spent the equivalent of US$8997 on core educational services per student while Finland spent US$7898. (OECD, 2012, p. 229)
Roberts (2013) expresses concern that the cosmopolitan nature of the Australian Curriculum separates content from rural school contexts, working to maintain the achievement gap between urban and rural schools, thus perpetuating inequality as discussed earlier (pp.31-33). To understand the importance of ‘place’ in overcoming educational inequity, Gatto quotes a letter written by the well-known American novelist, Wendell Berry in which he writes:

If you want to do good and preserving acts you must think and act locally. The effort to do good acts gives the global game away. You can’t do a good act that is global…a good act, to be good, must be acceptable to what Alexander Pope called ‘the genius of the place.’ This calls for local knowledge, local skills, and local love that virtually none of us has, and that none of us can get by thinking globally. We can get it only by a local fidelity…(1992, p.88).

Hannan, when speaking of an Australian curriculum12 feels that it should be both “school-based and skills-based” (1987, p.7) and the final construct of curriculum is “best left to schools and teachers, since various useful and valid combinations are possible” (1987, p.8), although general categories of content should be prescribed. While endorsing a degree of central control, he cautions that this could lead to an education comprised of superficial facts – a “trivial pursuits curriculum” (1987, p.14).

Drummond (2012) conducted several surveys to determine the effect of the Australian Curriculum on rural schools. The importance of locating pedagogy in contexts familiar to students was confirmed by one of these surveys as was the perception that teachers lacked sufficient preparation to implement the new curriculum. Rural school leaders were particularly concerned by inadequate resourcing, minimal professional development for staff and lack of consultation between policymakers and school leaders. If schools with professionally trained

12 It is clear from Hannan’s article that his use of the term “Australian curriculum” is referring to the cultural context (that is, the Australianness) of the content of a future national curriculum.
teachers feel under-prepared to begin teaching the Australian Curriculum after a small degree of professional development and consultation, it is reasonable to assume that homeschooling parents, with no access to either of these, would feel more so. Parents are experts on their children, their needs, strengths, challenges, motivations and potential but are unlikely to be authorities on delivering standardized curriculum such as the Australian Curriculum.

Educational alternatives

School reform
John Marsden, a successful Australian novelist, was interviewed on the ABC\textsuperscript{13} radio in November 2014 about his latest book (Delroy, 2014). During the interview, he was asked why he had founded ‘Candlebark’, an alternative school. In response he quoted a parent who gave this reason for enrolling her child in Candlebark: “Because the existing system is broken… it’s not only broken now but it was broken when I went to school and no-one seems to be doing anything to fix it.” Marsden proceeded to philosophize:

…I think it is broken, I think it’s badly broken and has been broken for generations. Nevertheless, many people survive it and some people even thrive in it but that tends to be people of a certain personality and a certain set of interests. So, for many, many other people, it doesn’t work at all and yet we continue to force these round pegs into square holes and try to make a broken system work for people for whom it can’t possibly work and the results are disastrous and we pay for that very heavily in all kinds of abstract and tangible ways.

Marsden is not the only educationalist advocating for school reform. Men and women of note have been petitioning for change in schooling for over a century. In 1903, John Dewey called for US public school systems to be reorganized more democratically (Dewey, 1903) and in 1913 for educational practices to start with the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item [\textsuperscript{13}] ABC – the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is Australia’s national public broadcaster.
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needs of the child (Dewey, 1913). Concurrently, Edmond Holmes, a former chief superintendent of English elementary schools, wrote: “…education, as it is conducted in Western countries, is profoundly repugnant to the natural instincts of the healthy child” (1912, p.69). Both these men advocated for radical changes to their education systems but were largely content to search for solutions within those systems.

The need for educational alternatives
Later educational philosophers such as John Holt, Ivan Illich, Henry Giroux, John Taylor Gatto, Don Glines and Ken Robinson and many others, have increasingly abandoned schools in their quest for reform in favour of alternative methods of education. Edward Fiske, former education editor of the New York Times, captures this sentiment well: “Getting more learning out of our present schooling system would be like trying to get the Pony Express to beat the telegraph by breeding faster ponies” (cited in Glines, 2012, p.1).

The sheer quantity and intensity of literature focused on the systemic transformation of education is overwhelming. Some of the more well-known works include provocative titles such as: Education without Schools (Peter Buckman, 1973), Deschooling Society (Illich, 1978), The End of Education: Redefining the value of school (Postman, 1996), Against School: How public education cripples our kids, and why (Gatto, 2003), Curriculum on the Edge of Survival: How schools fail to prepare students for membership in a democracy (Heller, 2007), Dumbing down Teachers: Rethinking the crisis of public education and the demise of the social state (Giroux, 2010) and most recently, Declaring War Against Schooling (Glines, 2012). While there are many different emphases amongst these works, they all highlight the failure of institutionalized schools to do well by the majority of students. Many speak of children merely ‘surviving’ their schooling experience.

Prescribed curriculum is one of the issues deliberated in many of the above texts. Heller (2007, p.96) echoes much of their sentiment when he asserts,
…there are no standardized students. Sometimes I think that our nation confuses legal and biological equality. Yes, we are all equal before the law, but no, we are not all equal with respect to physical and mental characteristics.

Holmes, having witnessed uniform curriculum in England for 33 years (from 1862 to 1895), labours the point that any prescribed syllabus is, by its very nature, a “bad syllabus.” He explains:

Yet even if, by an unimaginable miracle, they [uniform curricula] had all been educationally sound, the mere fact that all the teachers in England had to work by them would have made them potent agencies for evil. To be in bondage to a syllabus is a misfortune for a teacher, and a misfortune for the school that he teaches. To be in bondage to a syllabus which is binding on all schools alike, is a graver misfortune. To be in bondage to a bad syllabus which is binding on all schools alike, is of all misfortunes the gravest (Holmes, 1912, p.106).

Standardized testing (such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN]14) when partnered with a set syllabus, virtually guarantees that prearranged content will have priority over more localized and individualized material (Williams, Johnson, Peters & Cormack, 1999) – “What gets tested gets taught…” (Heller, 2007, p.xiv). Furthermore, evidence suggests that, cram-and-forget ‘learning’ inevitably dominates in environments of high-stakes testing and students, regardless of their potential, are discouraged from pursuing learning for its own sake (Dewey, 1903; Glines, 2012; Holmes, 1912; Holmes, 1913; Resnick, 2007). An even graver consequence is that standardized testing produces winners and losers in the subsequent ranking (Glines, 2012; Heller, 2007; Kohn, 2004; McLaughlin & Blank, 2004; Roberts, 2004). ‘Top’ students can only rise above the surface to the tip

14 NAPLAN tests are conducted in May each year for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The four areas tested are reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy.
of the iceberg because of the masses that lie submerged beneath them. This realization becomes critically important when viewed alongside research attesting that early patterns of success and failure are likely to be repeated right throughout a child’s school life (Glines, 2012; O’Loghlin, 2013) – the system as we know it, with its characteristic class-size and time constraints, insidiously works to preserve the achievement gap (Glines, 2012). Thus, one of the best predictors of school success in later years is success in the early years (O’Loghlin, 2013). The opposite is also true.

The Australian Curriculum dictates fixed, year-by-year delineated content. It has some inbuilt scope for movement though these are limited to predetermined associations and by the directive to stay true to original content. Moreover, the prescribed content is prioritized through a regime of standardized testing. There are and have been many examples of the use of prescribed curriculum, though I have yet to find one that has been overwhelmingly endorsed for its success in raising the standard of education across the spectrum. On the contrary, as described above, such systems appear to dogmatically reinforce existing societal inequalities (Giroux, 1983; Williams et al., 1999). Epstein (2007, para.13) succinctly identifies the problem when he states: “…effective learning — learning that benefits all students — is necessarily individualized and self-paced. This is the elephant in the classroom from which no teacher can hide.” Helping students survive in a system which innately works against them is not the ideal solution. There is no thriving and little joy for students submerged, year after year, in the bottom of the iceberg. There is genuine need for personalized curricula options.

The sustained increase in home education (Bunday, 2013) reflects the growing need for educational alternatives. Parents are increasingly turning to homeschooling as a last resort because their children have failed to thrive in the mainstream educational system as the all-too-common news articles demonstrate. Recent examples include

\[15\] Original emphasis.
Putting books away for unschool (Hyatt, 2013) and Bullied girl forced to do homeschool (Eeles, 2013). The families interviewed in these articles are seeking entirely different educational experiences from that which they abandoned – they are not looking to ‘do school’ at home. Rather, they are seeking customized learning experiences to fill gaps, to re-engage interest, to provide space and time to heal. Holt writes:

What is most important and valuable about the home as a base for children’s growth into the world is not that it is a better school than the schools but that it isn’t a school at all\(^16\) (1981, p.346).

Home education is education otherwise. It is different. It is flexible by nature and practised in many diverse ways. Conversely, the Australian Curriculum is comparatively fixed in scope and applied with relative uniformity. Home education regulation now stipulates that adherence to the Australian Curriculum is mandatory. In practice, how will parents negotiate regulation and apply it to their families? For the remainder of this chapter I will explore home education regulation and consider likely answers to this question.

Regulation

Who is responsible for children’s education?
Who is ultimately responsible for a child’s education? Does the State hold final accountability for education or is this primarily the responsibility of parents?

The State has a legitimate interest in the well-being and development of its future citizens (Harding & Farrell, 2003; Kunzman, 2009; Varnham, 2008). International law specifies that each child has a right to education which is generally incumbent on governments to provide (Allan & Jackson, 2010; Rousseau as cited in Glenn, 2005; Varnham, 2008). This basic obligation is usually absolved through the establishment and maintenance of a public education system (Varnham & Squelch, 2008). It is then beholden on parents to embrace this entitlement or seek an alternative.

\(^{16}\) Original emphasis.
The right to educational choice is enshrined in international documents to which Australia is a signatory. Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights 1948* states, “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” and Article 13 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966* requires States to respect the liberty of parents “to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions” (cited in Varnham & Squelch, pp.195/6). Further, Article 29 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1999* details that education should aim at developing “the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (cited in Varnham & Squelch, p.195) – this sounds very much like individualized instruction.

There is a broad assumption that governmental provision of funding for education carries with it the right to control its delivery (Varnham, 2008). However, parents also share the obligation, and hence responsibility, for government education – primarily, they must ensure the enrolment and continued attendance of their child in schooling (Varnham & Squelch, 2008). There is also an expectation that parents will play an active role in a child’s education – they are expected to support the completion of assigned homework, are asked to purchase books and equipment, are pressured to pay school fees and excursion costs, and, in the early years, are encouraged to listen to children read at home and provide ‘parent help’ in the classroom.

Homeschooling parents, however, commonly believe they are fully responsible for their children’s education (Hardenbergh, 2005; Holt, 1981; Pannapacker, 2005), that it is a natural extension of their early years training (Allan & Jackson, 2010; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Harding & Farrell, 2003; Kunzman, 2009; Rivero, 2008; Varnham & Squelch, 2008) and that adopting conventional schooling would be “surrender[ing] unto Caesar that which is God’s” (Smedley, 2005, p.73). Parents teach children to talk, to tie their shoe laces, to brush their teeth, to share with siblings and some view the teaching of literacy and numeracy similarly. If education is just part of parenting, it is understandable that parents may view regulation as an
imposition – after all, government authorities do not usually interfere with parenting unless there are reasonable grounds to suspect neglect or abuse.

Varnham and Squelch (2008) clarify that, while parents have some say in their child’s education, this must be exercised within the framework of state regulation. The wording of home education regulation in Western Australia reflects this position, in that the State ‘allows’ that education may occur at home (Varnham & Squelch, 2008; Jackson & Allan, 2010). Also, in registering for home education, parents acknowledge the authority of the State over education by seeking permission to homeschool. From this perspective, it seems reasonable for governments to take steps to ensure that a child’s education meets a minimum standard (Varnham & Squelch, 2008).

However, further investigation into the language of Western Australian home education policy reveals a patchwork of mixed messages. For example, home educators are told “…the Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline (Outline) sets out ‘the knowledge, understanding, skills, values and attitudes that students are expected to acquire and guidelines for the assessment of student achievement’” (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014a). Yet, in the recently revised Home Education Policy an ‘educational program’ is defined as “An organised set of learning activities designed to enable a student to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes relevant to the student’s individual needs” (Western Australia. Department of Education, 2014, p.3) and it refers to the School Education Act 1999 to define a home educator as an adult “responsible for the child’s educational programme…” (Western Australia. Department of the Premier & Cabinet, 2015, Section48(2)) (emphases mine).

In line with these last definitions, it is incumbent on homeschooling parents to assess the relevancy of the Outline for each child. For example, to become a productive, contented citizen, does a child need to “Develop the conditions for congruence of triangles” and “Factorize algebraic expressions by identifying numerical factors” as is prescribed in the Outline for every Year 8 student (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014b)? The answer is likely to be “no” for children not heading into a
mathematical or scientific field. In an information-rich society such as ours, can any fixed syllabus really dictate what knowledge is relevant to the needs of any one child to that level of detail?

**Homeschooling regulation**

Because home education has such distinctive characteristics that are used so diversely, it is problematic to regulate homeschooling in the same way as mainstream educational options. Judge Greany, a Massachusetts Supreme Court judge, in the case ‘Brunelle v Lynne Public Schools’ explains this effectively in his ruling. He said:

> These reasons have to be measured against the nature of the home education involved…which in certain important ways can never be the equivalent of in-school education. For example, at home, there are not other students (except perhaps siblings), no classrooms, and no rigid schedules. Parents who teach at home stand in a very different relationship to their children than do teachers to a class full of other people’s children. Teaching methods may be less formalized, but in the home setting may be more effective than those used in the classroom because the teacher-to-student ratio is maximized, a factor permitting close communication and monitoring on an individualized basis. It is obvious from these differences that, while the State can insist that the child’s education be moved along in a way which can be objectively measured, *it cannot apply institutional standards to this non-institutionalized setting* (cited in Varnham & Squelch, 2008, p.205, emphasis mine).

Varnham affirms that homeschooling “does not easily fit into the mould of classroom teaching” which renders legislation intended for schools as “inappropriate” for home education (2008, p.10).

As an illustration of the disjuncture caused by applying a school-like mindset to home education, a New Zealand homeschool support network posted the following excerpt on their website:
Parts of it [the registration form] are irrelevant. For example, describing the children’s work area is, in our opinion, a complete waste of time... They may do times tables and spelling in the car. They may do reading on Mum or Dad’s lap – or in a bed. They may be part of sports or other clubs. When writing, they may be at a computer, on the floor, at the dining table, or a lounge table, or a desk, depending on a number of factors...” (New Zealand Home Education, 2013).

Despite the evident incompatibility, the Western Australian government is now applying mainstream principles to homeschooling in an attempt to standardize outcomes throughout the state. District education offices, under instruction from the Director General have directed home educators to begin teaching according to the Outline with the aim of its eventual full implementation (Appendices A&B). There are several issues of concern with this directive.

First, as discussed in the earlier exposé of the Australian Curriculum (pp.30-34), even within conventional education systems there is strongly-voiced opinion that prescriptive curriculum, such as the Australian Curriculum, is not the best educational option for all students (Brennan, 2011; Conroy et al., 2008; Ditchburn, 2012a; Jackson & Allan, 2010). Ditchburn (2012a) concludes her article by suggesting that a better approach to curriculum development would begin with a purposeful focus on students’ requirements, experiences and ambitions. Brennan (2011) takes this further, determining that such a student-centred focus would better equip teachers to evaluate and serve the increasingly diverse needs of their students.

Second, as discussed, home education is a different form of education and it is largely these differences which provide the greatest benefits to students. Of the homeschooling parents they interviewed, Patterson et al. (2007, p.82) concluded, They have been able to accomplish what most public schools would like to do, but are unable because of prescribed curriculum, inflexible schedules and structures, and increased pressure to perform well on standardized tests.
Additionally, it appears that stringent regulation is redundant. In 2008, Dr Brian Ray from the USA’s National Home Education Research Institute collected demographic data and test results from 11,739 homeschooled students from all states, Puerto Rico and Guam. Amongst many conclusions, Ray found that homeschooled students from states with extensive regulation achieved, on average, the same results on standardized tests as students from states with much looser regulation (Ray, 2009, p.3). On the basis of six years of dedicated home education research, two of which involved the ethnographic investigation of six homeschooling families, Kunzman summarizes the assertions of the last two paragraphs in this statement: “Extensive regulations (such as a prescribed curriculum…) jeopardize the flexibility that makes homeschooling an effective educational choice for many families, and may offer relatively little added benefit compared to more modest requirements” (2009, p.323).

Lastly, it is doubtful that regulation sanctioning the use of inflexible curriculum can be enforced in practice. As Kunzman (2009, 320) considers homeschool regulation he observes that any topic can be presented in a biased manner so that, even if regulation stipulates a subject must be taught, the nature of exposure is impossible to judge. He comments that “the level of detail required for an outside evaluator to truly measure the breadth and depth of student learning… is beyond practicality.” It is, therefore, imperative that mandatory directive give way to conciliatory homeschool regulation.

*Home educators’ responses to regulation changes in NSW*

Given Kunzman’s insights, parents’ responses to regulation are imperative. Comprehensive changes to home education regulation in New South Wales were abruptly installed in August 2013. These attracted vehement criticism from the NSW home education community prompting the formation of an online petition which attracted almost 3000 signatories and comments calling for the new education amendment to be revoked. The petition (Hardy, 2013) began with the following standard letter:
To: Home schooling Dept, Office of the Board of Studies
The Hon. Adrian Piccoli, NSW Minister for Education

We are asking you to cancel the new Information pack that was released 26/8/2013 and consult with Home Educators. The new information pack has significant changes that will impact all home educators. It was prepared without any consultation and shows a lack of understanding of how home education works in practice.

No changes should be made to the home education package without widespread consultation and consideration of the particular needs of home educators.

Sincerely,

That the regulation changes resulted from a distinct lack of understanding of home education and that authorities had not entered into any meaningful consultation with homeschooling groups were recurring themes throughout the many submissions. Additionally, many comments expressed the concern that home educators were being forced into more rigid, school-like practices. One such comment read:

...it seems like the BOS [Board of Studies] will only accept a very rigid 'departmental/school' approach or nothing. If this is the case, it is the end to learning in a home-based environment as we know it. We are being asked to make 'mini schools'. This is not the reason I or anyone I know chose to homeschool. We chose to NOT do what school does. How does the package presented now demonstrate anything different to school???

The petition was closed in May 2014 after the establishment of an inquiry into homeschooling in New South Wales. At the time of writing, this inquiry is still ongoing.
Home education regulation in WA

How will regulatory changes in Western Australia be received? The changes being introduced here are somewhat unclear though certainly not as extensive as those proposed in the New South Wales Home Education Package. For example, there has been no mention of moderators making unannounced visits to people’s homes in WA or of the need to seek permission to teach at a level above or below a child’s school grade. In examining the demands of Western Australian home education regulation, I will consider three areas – content, timing and method.

The November 2012 Moderators’ Letter to home educators (Appendix A) which sparked my initial interest in this research, merely instructs parents to begin using the Australian Curriculum in the learning areas then available with the aim of full implementation by 2015. The Australian Curriculum, as discussed, is a detailed syllabus of grade-level content. There is no reference to any additional flexibility for home educators in this directive and parents are instructed to contact ACARA\(^\text{17}\) directly, should they have any questions. Parents are told they may ‘personalise’ their view of the curriculum – by showing it differently on the web page! Thus, from this letter alone, it seems that home educators must use the content and timing of the Australian Curriculum as prescribed and published by ACARA.

Subsequent correspondence received by home educators in February 2014 (Appendix B) does supply more detail although it contains some conflicting language and vagaries which are subject to possible differences in interpretation. In this letter, instead of being referred to ACARA and the Australian Curriculum, parents are directed to the Western Australian equivalents – SCSA\(^\text{18}\) and the Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline. With regards to content, it states “SCSA has advised that all educational programs, including home education programs, must reflect the Outline’s\(^\text{19}\) content, general capabilities and achievement standards…”

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\(^{17}\) ACARA – Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority  
\(^{18}\) SCSA – School Curriculum and Standards Authority (Western Australia)  
\(^{19}\) Throughout the entire letter (Appendix B), ‘Outline’ is written in italics.
and “Home educators may decide to continue using these materials [which they have previously been using] if they can demonstrate how they cover the Australian Curriculum’s content over time.”

With regards to timing, the letter offers some softening – it states, “Children may require a differentiated learning program, with different year level content in different learning areas, according to their capabilities and/or attainment.” With reference to methods, it asserts that “A diverse range of approaches and philosophies are used in home education. Some home educators, however, may need to add to and adjust their programs to ensure they meet the requirements of the Outline.” This appears now to restrict the use of some methods.

In summary, it appears from this second letter that home educators have been granted flexibility in the timing of content providing the material is found somewhere in the Outline. There seems to be no such allowance made for actual content; all knowledge contained outside the Outline is clearly considered invalid for education. Indeed, the letter states, “The Outline is a ‘one-stop shop’ that ensures education providers (including home educators) are meeting all the requirements for the education of children in Western Australia.” While a range of approaches will be accepted, some methods are considered unsuitable, though we are not privy to which approaches will need change or how. Further ambiguity is apparent in that the letter specifically states, with regards to evaluation meetings, “The primary focus will remain on the suitability and effectiveness of the program and on the child’s progress” while maintaining that “…the Outline is now the reference point for home educators and for home education evaluation meetings.”

That these directives demonstrate little appreciation for the nature of home education and are presented as impositions, that they are ambiguously worded and are intended for application by such diverse clientele, guarantees that homeschooling parents will assume a varied array of understandings of recent regulation changes. What will these perceptions be and how will Western Australian homeschooling parents respond to them?
Where this research is situated

Allan and Jackson (2010) scrutinize home education regulation across the states of Australia and observe that home education provides a totally different type of learning, that these differences are essential to the nature of homeschooling and that they should be recognised and preserved by regulation. They conclude:

It is argued that some regulation is acceptable, however once the state chooses to regulate home education the focus must be upon the child, recognising and facilitating successful educational and social outcomes from an informed position. A more consistent and fair framework of regulation than the one that presently exists in most jurisdictions is called for (p.66).

Allan and Jackson specifically contend that prescribed curriculum is “unacceptable” and that flexibility is a “cornerstone of the success” for homeschooling families making it “imperative” for regulation to recognize and accommodate diversity in educational approaches (p.71).

What, then, of regulation that demands the use of prescribed curriculum and virtually ignores the inherent flexibility of homeschooling? The literature is clear that most parents do not choose homeschooling to mimic schools and all evidence indicates that a growing portion of children are homeschooled because the school system has failed them. Imposing rigid practices actually violates the beliefs and hopes of many parents – this was made abundantly clear in the responses of NSW parents to changes implemented there.

Regulation should exist to “guard as much as possible against violations of the basic [educational] interests of children” (Kunzman, 2009, p.318) and guide the delivery of the highest possible educational outcomes for each and every child. If there is reason to believe that regulation is functioning to impede educational outcomes, this must be investigated with the appropriate recommendations implemented. Regulation is likely to be defective if parents, who are authorities on their children, believe that it is negatively impacting their children’s education. It is particularly critical that
detrimental regulation be corrected for families who have turned to homeschooling after problems in mainstream classrooms as they have no other alternatives.

Regulation that is ineffective should also be scrutinized. As stated earlier (p.49) it is very difficult to police comprehensive homeschool regulation. This would be particularly problematic if parents felt compelled, in the best interest of their child, to withdraw from registration, and hence accountability, altogether. Although impossible to verify, anecdotal evidence suggests there are significant numbers of unregistered home educators in Australia. Unregistered home educators are not subject to any accountability and are very difficult to identify. Driving homeschooling parents underground with excessively stringent regulation, will not improve poor practices, but will, instead, potentially deny them access to support networks and community facilities, exacerbating any educational problems which do exist.

For these reasons it is vital that home education regulation be examined through the lens of parents’ perceptions. Literature suggests that the demands of rigid curriculum is problematic to home education contexts and reactions to NSW regulation changes indicate that many home educators resent restrictive impositions. However, there does not appear to be any formal research investigating home educator’s perceptions of regulation mandating the use of prescribed curriculum or of their responses to such impositions. For education authorities in Western Australia to make informed, effective policy decisions, it is imperative to investigate how recent regulation changes are being interpreted and implemented by home educators in this state.

In this chapter I have sought to establish a basis for this research within the framework of extant literature. In Chapter 3, I explain the method and methodological approach used to guide the findings of subsequent chapters.

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20 Average estimates are around 30,000 unregistered homeschooled children in Australia in 2014 (Homeschool Downunder, 2015a; Twomey, 2015).
3. Method and Methodology

Introduction

In this study I will research the experiences of Western Australian homeschooling parents as they are directed to assimilate a seemingly rigid, content-prescribed curriculum into their non-traditional educational settings. The Australian Curriculum is designed to standardize the delivery of content to the masses (Brennan, 2011; Ditchburn, 2012a) while homeschooling is focused on the education of an individual child in the context of their family. What efforts are parents making to accommodate the designated curriculum? What are their attitudes to this obligation?

I begin this chapter by detailing and justifying my chosen methodology. This is followed by an outline of the selection process for my participants and the information gathering which ensued. I have endeavoured to explain my decisions along the way to provide as transparent a process as possible. This has, inevitably, been condensed but I have attempted to retain the essence of my recruiting and interviewing journey. Finally, I share some of the lessons I learned and the challenges I faced in order to build a foundation for subsequent chapters. Throughout this project, I have used pseudonyms for my participants and their children and have been deliberately vague with respect to their locations.

Methodology

In this section, I will explain in detail my choice of a phenomenological approach for this research. Though this methodology does not dictate the use of a single method (Benner, 2008; Byrne, 2001a; Miller & Salkind, 2002), the three-phased guideline outlined by Kögler (2008) afforded a suitable framework for this project. The first stage suggested by Kögler entails that the researcher examine his/her own background, beliefs and assumptions and consciously bracket these and set them aside. To this end, I have discussed my own homeschooling experiences in Chapter 1 and will outline further preconceptions throughout this chapter.
Kögler’s second stage involves gathering experiences discursively in the context of social practices. I achieved this by interviewing thirteen home educating parents whom I introduce in Chapter 4. An analysis of their responses follows in Chapters 5 and 6.

The third phase outlined by Kögler calls for the pre-understandings of the first phase to be synthesized with an analysis of the second, thus developing a shared orientation of meaning. This is undertaken in the final chapter of this project.

The first stage of Kögler’s method
The call for a researcher to authentically reflect on his/her own understanding and separate out their existing knowledge, often referred to as reflexivity, is consistent with much of the literature in methodology (Adelman, 1981; Benner, 2008; Byrne, 2001a; Denzin, Lincoln & Giardina, 2006; Lincoln, 1995; Miller & Salkind, 2002). I needed to begin by conceptualizing what I was bringing to this study and consciously ‘bracket’ these preconceptions, setting them aside for the duration of the data collection and analysis. Lincoln (1995, p.280) describes this as the need for the author to ‘come clean’ about his/her own stance in order to display honesty and authenticity. While my experiences as a homeschooling mother were useful in connecting me with home educators and in assisting the formulation of interview questions, it was important that I did not view each participant’s experiences through the lens of my own understandings as this would only result in producing different versions of my own story. As Polkinghorne (2005, p.143) cautions, “an account that is authentically the participant’s description depends on the integrity of the interviewers and their awareness of their own propensities to generate accounts that match their own expectations.” Later, in the final chapter of this thesis, I will include my bracketed preconceptions in the final construction of understanding.

Qualitative research
As I considered a methodological approach for this project I endeavoured to find the most appropriate framework, consistent with my worldview, to guide my research.
Having a mathematics background, I assumed that any research I undertook would be numbers-based, or at least have a mixed methodology, but as my focus crystallized, it became increasingly obvious that a qualitative approach was most suitable. I was looking to capture a depth of detailed, personal perspectives and experiences from home educating parents reflecting possible variations in the expression of homeschooling. Afterall, homeschooling is, by nature, an individualized approach to education – every family is different, every child unique, every situation unlike another. I believe that its practice should not be reduced to commonalities, to ‘what is normal’, to ‘what most people do’. So I relinquished the desire to represent the entire or even most of the homeschooling community, and chose instead to focus on a small number of personal accounts which would give voice to participants and provide dense, rich data expounding their experiences of the effect of the Australian Curriculum on them and their children. I was interested in the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of participants’ experiences not just in ‘what’ they were experiencing (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013, p.1).

Furthermore, a qualitative methodology afforded me the opportunity to recruit homeschooling parents as “co-researchers” who were “experts in their own experience” (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy & Sixmith, 2013, p.20) helping to authenticate the information they provided. According to Howe (2003, p.137), qualitative methods, including observation and interviews, provide the opportunity to investigate a phenomenon from the ‘inside’ and to “get below the surface appearances to obtain a richer and more nuanced understanding.” Geanellos (2000) goes further by suggesting that, wherever possible, she uses labels and phrases that the participants themselves have used since their choice of words often contain aspects of context and meaning beyond what may be initially understood.

Having determined to undertake a qualitative inquiry, I sought to further narrow my methodological scope. Again I looked to the characteristics of homeschooling as a guide for my approach – I wanted the research itself to reflect the essence of the phenomenon. It became clear over time that there was no one best methodology.
Like homeschooling methods, which must, for greatest benefit, select from the options available to best fit the needs of participants, I needed to borrow from a number of methodologies as they suited, to achieve the most effective result.

**Phenomenology**

The methodological paradigm which seemed inherently appropriate was phenomenology. A phenomenological study seeks to understand a phenomenon from the participants’ points of view as it is experienced by them, and to appreciate the meanings they attach to these experiences (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Byrne, 2001a; Collingridge & Gantt, 2008; Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano & Morales, 2007; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Miller & Salkind, 2002). This methodology complemented what I was seeking to achieve by allowing the attention to focus on the practices and understandings of homeschooling parents as they respond to changes in home education regulation. The way that parents felt the effect of regulation changes would depend on their motivations in choosing to homeschool, their beliefs as to their parental responsibilities, the needs of their child/ren and the methods they choose to achieve their objectives. As these factors vary significantly between homeschooling families, the experiences of different families to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum were also likely to be vastly different. For this reason it was important that individual accounts were gathered and analysed.

In addition, phenomenological research principles are not rigid and formulaic but “function as guidelines or outlines, and researchers are expected to develop plans of study especially suited to understanding the particular experiential phenomenon that is the object of their study” (Polkinghorne as cited in Miller & Salkind, 2002, p.154). Thus, a phenomenological approach afforded me the flexibility to choose the research techniques I deemed most appropriate and, as the ability to individualize structure and content is a central characteristic of home education, this again, reflected the intrinsic nature of homeschooling.
**Interpretive phenomenology**

However, within this paradigm, there is a broad range of possible approaches. Of the various types of phenomenology, interpretive phenomenology (also known as hermeneutic phenomenology) has, as its central assumption, the need for the researcher to have background knowledge of the phenomenon with which to contextualize any findings (Tuohy et al., 2013). This was important to me – I wanted to use my fifteen years’ experience as a home educator to aid my research. Lopez and Willis underline the importance of this central principle when they assert:

> It is the researcher’s knowledge base that leads to specific ideas about how the inquiry needs to proceed to produce useful knowledge. Therefore, personal knowledge, according to hermeneutic scholars, is both useful and necessary to phenomenological research (2004, pp.729-730).

This, again, closely mimics the nature of homeschooling as it is the in-depth knowledge of a child that allows a parent to best target their needs. That said, my intention was to be as transparent as possible in these initial stages of research so that the final construction would be a blended interpretation of the lived experiences of both the researcher and the participants (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Another relevant aspect of this phenomenological approach is the idea of ‘situated freedom’ (Cody, 1998; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Situated freedom develops the concept that individuals are constrained by the existing strictures of their social, cultural and political environments but do make choices within these confines (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This exactly paralleled my desire to examine parents’ responses to the confines of imposed homeschool regulation. Duffy & Scott (1998, p.186) insightfully define this process as “the right to choose to be different after a period of thoughtful reflection” which astutely describes any initial decision to homeschool.

While interpretive phenomenology fitted neatly with much of my worldview, there were two aspects of this methodology which I felt did not complement my desired approach. First, phenomenology does not allow for the possibility of meaning to be derived through power relations (Kögler, 2008). Homeschooling is fundamentally an anti-establishment activity – in our society, institutionalized schooling is the default
position from which parents must consciously opt out if they desire to homeschool their children. If they do make this choice, parents are required to ask permission of the State which has, since the 1830s, assumed responsibility for children’s education (McCreadie, 2006). Thus, power relations are inherent in any decision to homeschool.

Second, interpretive phenomenology is primarily concerned with the analysis of text, hence its alternative title – hermeneutic phenomenology. While dialogue is vital in interpreting the constructs of parents’ lived experience, how they homeschool is an important reflection of the meanings they assign to their experiences. This is most blatantly expressed by those home educators who choose not to register – they simply assume responsibility for their children’s education without seeking permission from the State. But there are many subtle expressions of consent and dissent in homeschooling practices (the methods employed, the resources used, the hours worked, etc.) which should be considered, in addition to their narratives, in the overall examination of parents’ responses to Education Department directives.

Critical hermeneutics
Critical hermeneutics is a specialized application of interpretive phenomenology, incorporating aspects of critical theory, with the single purpose of challenging the status quo by uncovering latent power disparities (Byrne, 2001b; Lopez & Willis, 2004). This enables researchers to establish how issues of power are innately integrated into life experiences. However, Kögl (2008, p.153) believes that critical hermeneutics allows a balanced perception as it does not reduce every meaning to an expression of power, rather, power relations are regarded as “one dimension of a symbolically medicated background, …[that] structure[s] meaning without defining it in its entirety.” This ultimately leads to a situation “where all meaning finally fuses into a harmonious consensus of truth”. This was my aim – to honestly articulate the shared reality of parents’ experiences, though I acknowledge with Smith (2008, p.460) that “no interpretation or construction of reality can be judged as uniquely right or wrong” and that no construction “is free of further interpretation and reinterpretation.” Geanellos (2000, p.118) reiterates that “researchers need to
appreciate that no single interpretation ever exhausts the meaning of a text. Moreover, every interpretation is an approximation.” Nonetheless, critical hermeneutics enabled me to construct multiple layers of meaning which could be assembled to produce a rich picture of participants’ experiences.

Further to this, critical approaches explicitly target the perspectives of minority and marginalized groups in order to give them voice (Duffy & Scott, 1998; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Portfilio, 2009). It gathers ‘border voices’ (Denzin, Lincoln & Giardina, 2006) and validates them. Indeed, Le Compte (as cited in Lincoln, 1995, p.282) contends that it is the obligation of “serious qualitative research to ‘seek out the silenced because their perspectives are often counter-hegemonic.’” Homeschooling is most definitely a counter-hegemonic activity and, because it is also such an individualized and diverse practice, it has no unified voice or cohesive representation. Who will speak for homeschooling parents wanting to personalize their children’s education while regulation, designed for the dominant education type, is imposed upon them? Homeschooling parents need the opportunity to be heard. Critical hermeneutics, then, appears to be a most suitable paradigm for this study, permitting an essentially interpretive phenomenological approach that is additionally sensitive to themes of authority and resistance. Yet, as discussed, the single focus of this methodology on dialogic interpretation was unlikely to produce a complete picture of the lived experiences of participants.
Interpretivism

As shown in Figure 1, critical hermeneutics is the intersection of three paradigms – phenomenology, interpretivism and critical theory. It encompassed much of my approach but did not incorporate the investigation of implied meaning in human action. However, as the interpretivist viewpoint seeks to interpret an action based on the context of the situation and the intentions of the performer (Howe, 2003; Schwandt, 2003; Smith, 1992), I only needed to expand my approach to include the broader aspects of interpretivism. Schwandt (2003) gives the example of raising one’s hand – depending on the situation, this could be interpreted as voting, as hailing a taxi or as seeking permission to speak. This facet of interpretivism, then, completed the methodological position of this research.

For the purposes of this project, therefore, I have utilized aspects of the critical hermeneutics and interpretivist methodologies while not completely adopting either. The critical hermeneutics perspective allowed me to examine themes within the discourses of homeschooling parents faced with the directive to adopt a prescriptive curriculum and to specifically scrutinize issues of power and personal freedom as they arose. Incorporating features from the broader interpretivist perspective permitted me to extend this analysis to parents’ actions and decisions. Together, these paradigms provided a useful framework within which to conduct my research.

Method

The remainder of this chapter will outline how and why I chose my participants, the procedure I adopted to collect their experiences and some of the challenges I faced along the way. In doing so, I will frequently refer to specific participants for whom I have tried to provide a little context. A more detailed profile of each participant is provided in the next chapter.

Method of data collection

The second phase of Köglers’ (2008) method requires the gathering of participants’ experiences within the contexts they are embedded. “Experience has a vertical
“depth” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p.138) which necessitates the exploration of first-person accounts in a way which is both flexible and penetrating. Therefore, I decided to collect participants’ experiences using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Interviews with a small number of participants are considered particularly suitable to collect data for phenomenological research as participants are able to give their experiential accounts, then clarify and elaborate as they see fit while tensions can simultaneously become apparent (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Collingridge & Gantt, 2008; Polkinghorne, 2005; Miller & Salkind, 2002).

The sample – In theory

**Number of participants**

Having decided on a method of data collection, I now needed to establish the number of participants to interview. My aim was to understand the effects of the Australian Curriculum on each participant as they experienced it – I wanted to develop an ‘insider’s understanding’ (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). This compelled me to choose a small number of “information-rich cases” (Patton in Polkinghorne, 2005, p.140). Previously, in consultation with my supervisors, I had determined that ten to twelve interviews would permit me to pay sufficient individual attention to each participant while still achieving a diversity of perspectives. However, in consultation with homeschooling friends, I began to doubt whether participants would have any understanding of what the new regulation required of them. Hence, I decided to interview each participant twice – the first to establish a profile of their methods, motivations and contexts and to introduce the topic of the new regulation; the second, some weeks later, to specifically focus on the response of participants to the Australian Curriculum. In this way, participants would have sufficient time between interviews to gather information regarding the new regulation and, if necessary, develop a measured response. Thus, we settled on six individual interviewees as an achievable and appropriate number.
Selection criteria
To obtain rich and relevant narratives, I established a number of criteria by which to select participants. This method of selection is termed criterion sampling (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008). The first criterion for participants was, most obviously, the need to be home educating parents. In addition, I required all participants to live and homeschool in Western Australia – each state has different home education regulations, so restricting my participants to one legislative region allowed me to focus on the impacts of that one system. Initially, for purely practical purposes, I narrowed this further and specified the South-West region of WA as my preferred area of intake. After a period of several weeks of receiving no responses to emails or letters of invitation, I extended my intake area to include anyone south-west of a line from Perth to Albany.

I also required participants to be registered with the Department of Education. This was an important consideration as unregistered home educators have purposely placed themselves outside the jurisdiction of education authorities and, as such, are unlikely to be impacted by the introduction of altered regulation.

In addition, I anticipated that a participant’s contribution would be optimized if they had homeschooled for some time prior to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum (that is, before January 2013) and for a period after. This would afford a before-and-after comparison. However, I did make two exceptions to this particular criterion as I will explain later in this chapter.

Lastly, some home education families purchase set curriculum from recognized home education organizations (such as Southern Cross Educational Enterprises). These families have some choice in some elective subjects but have essentially deferred major decisions of content to these curriculum providers. Thus, I felt it pointless to interview anyone engaged in this brand of home education as it is the organizations which are faced with the responsibility of meeting the requirements of the Australian Curriculum rather than the individual home educator.
It is interesting to note that all the people I interviewed were women. It was not my intention to seek only female participants, however I personally know of no fathers who are their children’s principal educator, so I was not surprised by this outcome. Some fathers appeared, from anecdotal stories told by their partners, to be intimately involved in their children’s education (particularly in undertaking stereotypical father/son activities such as tinkering with mechanical equipment or doing woodwork in the shed) though some fathers were not mentioned at all. I suspect several of the women are single parents but I deliberately chose not to enquire into family dynamics unless the participants themselves thought the subject relevant enough to broach.

Selection methods
As a long-term member of a homeschooling community, I had access to a number of potential participants, however, I desired to extend my research to include a greater diversity of practices than was available through my immediate acquaintances. For this reason, I intended to use snowballing techniques (Tranter, 2010) to build a network of potential participants from which to select interviewees. Snowball sampling uses an initial group of informants who are asked to recommend other prospective contacts who are asked to suggest other contacts until sufficient participants have been gathered. The home education community is not one homogenous group but is made up of intricate networks of families and small groups. This makes it very difficult to contact potential participants and why snowballing was considered a suitable selection method for this research (Tranter, 2010).

Purposive sampling uses prior knowledge of a target population and the purpose of a study to select a sample (Tranter, 2010). As I was seeking only five or six interviewees and, as I will explain shortly, I already had three candidates from diverse backgrounds ready to be contacted after ethics approval had been granted, I was optimistic that the snowballing process would deliver a larger-than-necessary pool of potential participants. Thus, I anticipated that I would need a selection process with which to narrow my choice of participants. As I desired to represent a wide range of home
education methods and ideologies, I resolved to use my knowledge of homeschooling practices to purposively select as diverse a range of participants as possible. This type of purposeful selection is termed maximum variation sampling and is thought to be eminently suitable for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The sample – In practice

Finding participants

I sought six participants and, even before I had begun the search for potential candidates, I had been offered three contacts from associates who knew of friends who “would be perfect for your research”. However, one of these contacts had a newborn baby, the second was not interested as she had a wonderful moderator and could see no personal value in such research, and the third did not respond to my emails. I had several friends who readily sent out emails on my behalf with my information letter (see Appendix C) and contact details attached, but none of these bore fruit – some had recently ceased homeschooling, some were using generic purchased curriculum and many simply never made contact. I quickly realized the need to broaden the search beyond my immediate circle of friends and associates. Finding anyone to interview, let alone five or six home educators, now seemed challenging.

At this time, I decided to alter my information letter to reduce the perceived emphasis on the Australian Curriculum. What little feedback I had received had given me the impression that mentioning the Australian Curriculum was scaring people away. I changed the title on my information letter from ‘Homeschooling and the Australian Curriculum’ to ‘Homeschooling in Western Australia’ and added the sentence, “You don’t need to have a thorough knowledge of the Australian Curriculum, just a good understanding of what works for you and your family” to the opening paragraph (see Appendix C). I also changed the subject heading in related emails from ‘Homeschooling and the Australian Curriculum’ to ‘Homeschool Research’.
I simultaneously intensified the search for participants – it was clear they were not coming to me, so I turned to the internet to find the contact details of anyone who might educate their children at home. I discovered an online network of Western Australian home educators who called themselves ‘natural learners’. Natural learning allows, “the process of learning to occur, unhindered by interference, in a social context where the learner is not isolated from the world of meaningful action” (Paine, n.d.). This was potentially a pool of home educators who were reluctant to use prescribed curriculum. I signed up, wrote a profile of myself and explained a little about my research. I then trawled through five years of postings looking for specific contact details – people with uncommon names, telephone numbers, email addresses, etc. but, as I suspected and later had confirmed on numerous occasions, home educators are naturally suspicious of public scrutiny and exceedingly protective of their identities. Thus, there were few personal details to be found, with almost all contributors choosing names such as ‘FlutterButter’ or ‘MumOf5’. As a result, five hours of searching divulged a single name – a man from Bunbury who was listed in the White Pages. However, his children were two and four years old respectively – not what I had been hoping for. He was very supportive but had not yet joined any physical homeschooling groups, so this proved fruitless.

Something I did discover from that site was an ongoing conversation, over several years, between three women who regularly holidayed together on the south coast, only a few hours travel from my home town. They later discussed moving there permanently. One woman had an unusual first name but no surnames were given.

Soldiering on, still with not a single interview secured and now more convinced than ever that I would have to ‘make this happen’, I scanned an online petition (protesting against recent changes to home education regulation in New South Wales) initiated in August, 2013. It was Australia-wide with some 2700 signatures and comments. Each person who wrote a comment gave their name and location – most were general though some listed a specific suburb. I sifted through this massive list (the equivalent of 187 A4 pages of 12 point text!) and wrote down all the names of people
who identified as being from particular Western Australian locations – approximately thirty names. Of these, some had common surnames or had names not listed in the directory at all; some were from northern regions of WA. I was left with three names that could be identified within a couple of telephone calls.

I rang one woman from Mt Barker, a town not far from my home, who explained that she was a homeschool sympathizer and not a home educator herself. Next I rang Mandy. For some reason, she had given the suburb of her parents-in-law. They took my details and, after a short wait, I received a phone call from her and yes, she was happy to be interviewed. We arranged the interview for Monday morning as this was a public holiday and her husband could mind the children. My first interview! I then rang the last of the three people on my list. Judi had actually finished homeschooling a year before but was looking to be involved in homeschooling her grandchildren, the eldest of whom was six years old. Although not currently homeschooling, she had done so for many years, had only recently finished and her intention was to continue to be involved so I reasoned that I should waive my before-and-after criterion for her. She agreed to be interviewed on the following Tuesday.

With my first two interviews organized for the following week, on the advice of my supervisors I asked a friend, Sharyn, if I could run through my interview questions with her to get her feedback on my questions. This proved to be wonderfully fortuitous as it provided some crucial information from the outset – at the end of that practice interview, Sharyn showed me a letter she had recently received from her moderator (see Appendix B). This letter spelled out the most recent directives to home educators regarding the Australian Curriculum. Sharyn photocopied it for me so I was able to refer to it even in my first official interview with Mandy. Mandy had received the same letter from her moderator and had already developed a thoughtful response to it. I subsequently discovered that this letter had been sent to home educators in all districts. This, in turn, rendered a follow up interview redundant – I would only need one interview per participant. I subsequently decided to return to our original plan of interviewing ten to twelve home educators.
Mandy offered to put my information letter on Facebook and I soon received a response from Jenny – my third interview. Judi offered to contact several friends for me and produced a few names. I recognized one name as someone I had met once, about five years before. I actually already had her contact details. I telephoned that night and Larissa agreed to be my fourth interviewee. She, in turn, sought permission to invite me to her homeschooling support group but was met with a solid ‘no’ by the organizers – a tangible demonstration of the suspicion held by many home educators toward outsiders. Instead she forwarded my information letter directly to several friends recommending they contact me. None did, though I did make contact with one of them, Elizabeth, through a different source on which I will elaborate later.

By this stage, I had received an email from Gabriella, living in a south-west town, who had seen my message on the natural learning network. She was about to leave on holiday for two weeks but was happy to be interviewed on her return. She eventually became my eighth interviewee.

Feeling now that the snowballing process was gaining momentum, I sat back and waited for it to continue – with so much groundwork done, I thought there would now be a stream of participants contacting me – or at least a trickle. But after the first four interviews, all in Perth, everything stopped – a week later I had not received a single further inquiry. Again I realized the onus was on me to find contacts.

The previous October, in my research proposal presentation, I had referred to a newspaper article which detailed one family’s homeschooling story. I had used this account as an example of why flexibility in homeschooling regulation was highly desirable. I found the idea of interviewing Rachel, the mother in that article, very attractive as it lent a certain symmetry to my project. Although she had a hyphenated surname, I was unable to locate her contact details but did find a blog she had posted on-line. Not knowing if this was current, I briefly introduced myself, posted a comment and waited. The next day I received an email from her. Yes, she was still homeschooling; yes she was interested in being interviewed. I emailed her my information and waited. She never answered that email.
However, buoyed with perceived internet success, and desiring some south-western input, I typed random towns and ‘home education’ or ‘homeschool’ into my computer’s search engine. After some time, I found a three-year-old notice advertising a homeschooling conference. I rang the contact lady who had since ceased homeschooling, apparently shortly after the conference (not a very good advertisement really!) but when I explained my purpose in calling, she started regurgitating names, telephone numbers and email addresses. I should have stopped her and asked her to forward on my information to these people but I had become convinced of the need to directly contact participants and disillusioned with people’s willingness to contact a complete stranger. So, I let her continue. She gave me six names with contact details. Five of these did not produce interviews however the sixth person, Elizabeth, had already heard of my research through Larissa. She was happy to be interviewed and apologized for not contacting me earlier.

Also at this time I discovered another small homeschooling group advertised on the internet. Again, I didn’t know whether or not this was a current posting. I rang the contact number and learned that Jacinta had only recently started the group. She had four sons and, although somewhat cautious, agreed to an interview the next week when I was in Perth – my sixth interview.

I also remembered a friend of a friend whom I had helped with some advice and resources a year before. I had never met Mary but I did have her email address. I had assumed that she only had one child and had begun homeschooling him the year before but I needed participants and I was heading to Perth for the next two interviews, so I emailed her. Mary responded, informing me that she had been homeschooling her son for five years but had changed her methods a year ago which is when she had sought my advice. Moreover, she had a very close friend, the mother of eleven, who was also homeschooling. Would I like to interview them both together? I expressed my preference to interview them individually but they would not be separated, so Mary and Jane, together, gave me my seventh interview.
I knew I had one interview with Gabriella approaching – that would make eight. Early on in my search for participants, I had spoken directly to Sarah, whose name I found on a popular homeschooling website. At the time, she was unwilling to be interviewed as she was extremely busy (she detailed her commitments to me and she really was stretched) but volunteered to pass on my information to members of her homeschooling group. None of those members contacted me and, as she lived near Gabriella, I emailed Sarah to ask if she could possibly see me while I was there. She agreed (although I will explain later how she withdrew but I was able to find a replacement) – my ninth interview. I needed one more and preferably one from the south-west as I felt I already had a sufficient number from Perth.

The last interview contact came when I rechecked my list from the online petition. One of the names stood out – an unusual first name, listed in Fremantle whose contact information I had not been able to source. However, I recognized the first name as being the same as a person from the natural learning network who might be moving south. On a hunch, I searched that town’s local directory and there it was. Kate was extremely busy, and again, very guarded, asking many questions about what I was doing and why but she did agree to see me the following week.

I conducted the last six interviews within the space of one week. I was done. But there was nonetheless a feeling of incompleteness – if only I had been able to interview Rachel from the newspaper article. Two weeks later, I again needed to travel to Perth so I decided to extend an interview invitation once more to Rachel. I headed the email, “Homeschooling Research – Last Chance” and explained that I had finished my recruiting process but that I would still love to talk to her as her story had been central to my research proposal. To my surprise and delight, she responded the next day and I interviewed her, my eleventh interview, while in Perth. She was the second exception to my criterion of needing to homeschool both before and after the introduction of the Australian Curriculum as she had only begun homeschooling in January 2013. However, this interview did provide some very useful data in a number of ways as I will discuss in later chapters.
Summary of sampling techniques
Although many of my friends and participants contacted their friends on my behalf, very few of my interviews actually came from snowball sampling. In theory, snowball sampling should have provided me with a large number of contacts from which to select interesting participants. In practice, I actually had very little prior knowledge of the methods or motivations of any of the participants I gained using this method—I simply interviewed any willing participant who was suggested to me by others. In reality, then, this became a kind of convenience sampling.

Two interviews came from information posted on internet sites. This is more correctly described as self-selected sampling which is “where people are requested to make contact with the researchers to participate in a study” (Tranter, 2010, p.139). I had a reasonable expectation that anyone who responded to an on-line post would have strong opinions regarding the subject. In fact, this was only partially true.

The balance of interviews resulted from direct contact with people as I was able to locate their details. This could be considered purposive sampling particularly early on when I sought people who identified as natural learners or those who had left comments on a petition. However, the more prolonged the selection process, the broader my search became. For example, I knew only that Jacinta was involved in a homeschooling group. Hence, this also degenerated into a form of convenience sampling.

I do feel that I achieved my goal to represent a wide spectrum of home educators. I interviewed two women who were extremely child-led and unstructured in their approach and one participant who was so rigid in her approach that she made conventional schools look very flexible indeed. The other participants were scattered along the spectrum between these two extremes. Thus, while I can in no way claim that my sample is representative of the Western Australian homeschooling population, a wide variety of methods and motivations are represented by those who took part in this study.
Sampling discoveries
The process of recruiting my thirteen home educators highlighted a number of relevant matters. Foremost, I expected a significant proportion of the homeschooling population would be concerned enough about the issue of prescribed curriculum to volunteer their voice, even though home educators are characteristically busy and cautious. I did not record every interview invitation I sent out or those sent by others on my behalf, nor do I know how many people saw my posting on the natural learning website or the facebook information instigated by Mandy, but the response rate must have been exceedingly low. Of my thirteen participants, only two were self-selected and Jane was brought to the interview by her friend, Mary. The other ten participants agreed to participate only after direct contact from me.

I was interested in this lack of response and, as Elizabeth was aware of my research weeks before I telephoned her, I decided to ask her why she had made no attempt to contact me. After our interview, I emailed Elizabeth thanking her and wrote:

*I have found it difficult to get people to respond after just seeing my information sheet – almost all the ladies I have interviewed have agreed to do so only after I have personally contacted them by email or phone. Would you mind just briefly letting me know why it was that you didn't contact me after getting the information sheet? I don't want to put you on the spot but a bit of insight on this would go a long way to helping me understand people’s lack of response. The more honest that you are, the more I’ll get out of it…*

Elizabeth replied,

*I didn't respond when Larissa… gave me your information sheet because it just got shoved into a big pile of 'things I could do if I had spare time'. Of course 'spare time' never happens so I wouldn't have ever got around to emailing you! When you contacted me it became more personalised and I wanted to help you out. It was especially helpful to have you state the days and times you would be in Perth so I could easily work out if I was able to fit it in or not. It made the idea of organising something extra in an already busy schedule much more straightforward.*
Elizabeth’s response vindicated my decision to ask for only one interview per participant. It is also interesting, that the one person, Sarah, who pulled out of an interview, did so on the basis that one more thing was one thing too many. She was extremely apologetic and expressed her desire to help but her inability to do so. From these replies, I conclude that the lack of response did not necessarily indicate that home educators did not see the value of this research – only that they gave precedence to that which was immediately beneficial to their family. This lack of spare time proved to be a relevant aspect in the effect of the Australian Curriculum on home educators as I will discuss in subsequent chapters.

I also discovered that placing ‘Australian Curriculum’ front and centre on my information sheet did seem to render my research unpopular. This was impossible to confirm but, early on in the recruiting process, I did have several women decline an interview on the basis that it was concerned with the Australian Curriculum. Once I reduced this focus, everyone with whom I personally spoke, accepted my invitation to be interviewed. Home educators’ attitudes to the Australian Curriculum are a contributing factor to their uptake of it – I will discuss this point extensively in later chapters.

As most participants were contacted unexpectedly and I was seeking to probe into their homeschooling methods and motivations (a potentially personal topic) there was frequently a degree of wariness. Initially, most participants asked how I had obtained their details and several questioned me extensively about what I would do with any collected information. Through subsequent correspondence, I made conscious efforts to establish rapport, as I will outline in following paragraphs, but even so, one lady repeatedly reminded me that I was not to use her real name and several participants were reluctant to sign the consent form until later in the interview.
The interviews

In theory
Fontana and Frey (1994, p.361) describe interviewing as “one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings.” As explained earlier, I chose this method as it afforded the collection of rich, in-depth data. I planned to use guide questions in each interview (see Appendix D) to move the flow of conversation along in a general direction but would, as much as possible, allow participants to direct discussion from those starting points. My intention was to use impromptu questioning to ‘dig deeper’ and examine significant issues which arose. By having some shared questions for each interview I hoped that similarities and differences of perceptions would emerge naturally.

In practice
I had originally intended to loosely use some predetermined guide questions throughout the interviews, however, I found myself instead adopting a common framework, and after the first few interviews, no longer even referred to my sheet of guide questions. I had determined from my practice interview that I should begin by finding out about the children – all of them. It was evident that this was a wonderful ice-breaker which provided a natural springboard for discussion on children’s early educational experiences and the motives for homeschooling. If older children had finished schooling, we tended to discuss them first and follow them through to their current circumstances. We would then discuss the children who are currently educated at home. This would logically work around the methods and approaches used by the family. From here we would talk of children’s interests, strengths and struggles which would subsequently lead to the future direction of currently schooled children. What was regulation instructing them to do? Had they made any changes to accommodate the new curriculum? Would children’s needs be met by the Australian Curriculum and did it fit with their current methods? Typically the Australian Curriculum was only mentioned in the last ten minutes or so of each interview.
In summary then, the interviews, particularly the later ones, became more like a conversation than a question and answer session – “a pseudo-conversation” as Oakley (1981, p.32) suggests. This concurs with Simons (1981, p.33) belief that “an interview should be a conversation piece, not an inquisition.” Yes, I tended to ask the majority of the questions but, more often than not, these flowed naturally from previous responses until that particular point of interest was fully explored or had logically led to the next topic.

Prior to the start of interviewing I read the seemingly dry Closing Methodological Divides: Towards Democratic Educational Research by Kenneth Howe. It was, indeed, relentlessly theoretical and difficult to absorb, but toward the end I came across this fragment printed in italics: “always treat persons as ends in themselves and never solely as means” (2003, p.114). This became my mantra for each of the twelve interviews. If there was a gap in a story I was interested in filling it in order to complete that person’s narrative whether or not it had anything to do with the Australian Curriculum. And many times I was rewarded in that these details did, in fact, add richness and purpose to the storyline which proceeded.

**Rapport and reciprocity**

*Establishing rapport*

As part of my decision to interview each participant once only, I resolved to email the two official Moderators’ Letters to participants (the first, sent in November 2012, which had sparked my initial interest (Appendix A); the second, sent in February 2014, which Sharyn had given me (Appendix B)), along with my information letter (Appendix C). I followed this process successfully for Interviews 3 and 4, however, I also did this for Rachel (from the newspaper article) and, after having such a rapid initial response, received no further communication from her at all. Had I overwhelmed her? Was this too much information too soon? At this point I determined to ‘handle’ potential participants with more care – I resolved to be more gradual in my approach and to pay more attention to establishing rapport.
Polkinghorne (2005, p.142) suggests that qualitative interviews which are “a one-shot occurrence lasting about 1 hr are most often not sufficient to produce the full and rich descriptions necessary for worthwhile findings.” He then refers to Seidman who suggests that a series of three interviews with each participant would more readily yield denser narratives. Since adjusting my procedure to one interview per participant, my interviews would now exactly fit Polkinghorne’s description. Yet I felt I could gather all my data in one interview and could not ask home educators for extra interviews just for the sake of having more interviews – this would not be showing kindness to those who were helping me. Also, I felt that some follow-up could easily be achieved via emails if it were needed.

For these reasons, I resolved to invest more in establishing a basis of trust and openness before I actually met each person. Of course, there were as many derivations in procedure as there were participants, however, from Interview 5 onward, this is generally what followed my initial personal contact with a candidate: First, I would send out a personal email of invitation with my information letter attached. Once a candidate responded positively, I would send an email of thanks, arrange an interview time and answer any specific concerns. I would reiterate that I was a former home educator and could appreciate how busy they were. Following a definite interview arrangement, I would send the two Moderators’ Letters asking, “Have you received anything like these?” and stating, “I will be interested to hear what you think of this information.” Lastly, the day before the interview, I would send an email to check details and to give them my mobile number, should any problems arise. I hoped this process might prompt them to read the Moderators’ Letters if they had not already done so. There were times when this process was greatly condensed as in the case of Helen, my substitute interviewee for Sarah, with whom I made initial contact just two days prior to interviewing. Generally, I had corresponded with each participant four to six times before an interview and had received a similar number of emails in return.
Maintaining rapport

Much of the literature regarding interviewing techniques spoke of the need for a balance between professionalism and friendliness – there are cautions for being both too business-like and too familiar. The interviewer, they say, needs to display both empathy and vigilance – to create an environment of acceptance, safety and warmth, while being astute enough to garner important details and dig further. Kvale (2007, p.10) explains it this way: “The craft consists in calibrating social distances without making the subject feel like an insect under the microscope.” The interview should be non-hierarchical – a collaborative affair. Some commentators saw interviewing as an art; some as a contradiction; others likened it to walking a tight-rope. All agreed that interviewing was a difficult undertaking.

From all this good advice, I deduced that interviewing was first and foremost, relational. If there was to be any meaningful outcome, I needed to develop a working relationship with each participant. The nature of this relationship, however, was different for each participant. Some participants sought a relationship that was light and friendly; others were more comfortable with an association akin to that of the traditional interviewer/interviewee. ‘Calibrating social distances’ proved to be an interview-by-interview proposition. My meeting with Judi, for example, lasted long after I had turned off the recorder. She offered me coffee and home-baked goodies. As I was leaving, we prayed and hugged and I promised to be in touch when I was again in Perth. Helen, on the other hand, did not elaborate on any personal details, did not ask me for any and our interview was over in less than thirty minutes. Kate admitted her initial reservations while still giving me detailed descriptions of family life and motivations. However, she never once used any of her family’s names referring to them only as ‘my husband’, ‘my son’ and ‘my daughter’. So, having laid the foundations for as open and friendly as possible a relationship through telephone and email correspondence, my approach was then to try to ‘read the signs’ in participants’ responses and to reflect and reciprocate their tone as much possible.
**Reciprocity**

In addition to simply forming a working relationship with participants, I aimed to reciprocate the goodwill shown to me, if I were able. Oakley (1981, p.49) states there is “no intimacy without reciprocity.” Being ready to ‘give something back’ should the opportunity arise, would contribute to creating the non-hierarchical relationship necessary for a more open exchange – it would provide a foundation of mutuality.

I did not discuss the idea of reciprocity prior to an interview other than to state that, 

“It is possible that there may be no direct benefit to you from participation in this study though it is hoped that the information gained will increase the understanding of the methods and motivations of home educators in WA and may provide direction for future homeschool regulation. I am happy to forward you a summary of findings from this research” (from my Information Letter, Appendix C).

However, on arrival at each interview, I sought to establish my intention to return their kindness by handing each participant a token gift (usually a jar of homemade plum jam) and looked for ways to help should the opportunity arise. I was able to find some way of reciprocating for all but one of my participants.

Reciprocity came in many forms. For example, one parent had heard of a new online test now required for graduation by Year 10 students. As my husband was the Year 10 coordinator at his school, I later emailed the necessary information to her. On another occasion, I passed on some specific exercises to one woman to help with her son’s fine motor skills. These had been given to my eldest son by an occupational therapist and had greatly helped his penmanship. At other times I offered parents information concerning nearby homeschooling groups of which I had knowledge. I made a piñata for one woman whose son was turning 10 two weeks after our interview. Twice I offered for a family to visit us on the farm – one of these ladies had only lived in Australia for a year and was teaching her sons Australian geography (I thought they might like to actually come and see some). She did bring her family to visit for four days and will likely come again.
In turn, I frequently came away with more than just a recorded interview. Several women offered me something to drink and one kind lady gave me lunch when she realized I hadn’t yet eaten. Two participants helped me with a separate ongoing project. Four interviewees suggested literature I might find helpful for my study. Everyone I later emailed to ask clarifying questions generously took time to respond to my requests. My small attempts at reciprocity were richly rewarded.

**Some challenges**

“*Always treat persons as ends in themselves and never solely as means*” (Howe, 2003, p.114). This stood me in good stead for some of the hiccups that followed. One such problem transpired in my very first interview. I was to meet Mandy at a busy café on a public holiday. I arrived early and waited. At twenty minutes past the set meeting time I telephoned Mandy. She’d been at the hospital emergency department all night with her son who had been struggling to breathe. His breathing had eventually been regulated and they had arrived home around 8am. She had fallen asleep wanting to get a couple of hours rest before our interview. Mandy was so apologetic but I was genuinely able to say, “Don’t worry, this is just an interview, we can organize it for some other time. It’s much more important that your son is fine.” And I meant it, even though I knew I could only be in Perth for two days and was struggling to find participants. In the end, she insisted we meet (eventually 75 minutes late), I bought her a huge café latte and we had a great discussion.

“*Always treat persons as ends in themselves and never solely as means*” again proved beneficial toward the end of my interview schedule. I had arranged an interview two hours’ drive from home with Gabriella. Sarah had also agreed to meet me although she had previously said she was too busy. However, two days before these scheduled interviews, I was in Perth on my way to interview Mary and Jane when, having reassessed her priorities, I received a very apologetic text from Sarah. I felt terrible. I knew that she regularly attended church, so I emailed her to convey, not just my acceptance of the circumstances, but my sincere wishes of goodwill along with several Scriptures which I had found encouraging and which addressed some of
the trials she had mentioned. I was able to say, “That’s fine, the research will take care of itself. I might be able to find someone else to interview anyway.” At the time, I had no idea if I could find a substitute at such short notice, particularly since a month of detective work had revealed no other contacts. As stated, I received this information on the way to an interview. As it drew to a close Mary enquired how my research was going. I explained that a participant had just cancelled our interview and I wished to find a replacement to have a full complement of twelve interviews. Providentially, Jane had a homeschooling friend in that town and sent me the contact details for Helen that evening. Helen had not only done a lot of research into the Australian Curriculum, but had even conducted an information session for other home educators on the subject.

Using the approach and procedure outlined in this chapter, I interviewed thirteen home educating mothers regarding why and how they educate their children and their response to recent regulation changes. In Chapter 4, I profile each of these parents to provide a foundation for the findings of subsequent chapters.
4. The Participants

**Sharyn**

Sharyn is a friend of 16 years; we belonged to the same homeschool support group. She has one older son, now at TAFE and a seven year gap to her second son, a daughter in Grade 1 and a son starting Pre-primary. She also has two younger children. She kindly agreed to be my ‘guinea pig’ at short notice. Sharyn began homeschooling with her eldest son, Jay, after he had completed several years of schooling. This decision was chiefly for religious reasons, though Jay was not thriving academically. Sharyn most appreciates having the time and freedom to teach her children in a manner consistent with her beliefs. Much of the content Sharyn chooses to teach is sparked by the children’s own interests though much of what is learned is structured and teacher-directed. They use a wide variety of resources but focus on books. Sharyn finds the time and energy to homeschool challenging because she has so many little children.

**Mandy**

Mandy lives in Perth. I sourced her name from an on-line petition concerned with amendments to NSW homeschooling regulation. She has a daughter and two sons, all primary school aged. Both boys display autistic tendencies (since the interview they have been formally diagnosed) and severely struggled with classroom schooling even though they had attended a small, student-centred community school. Mandy is incredibly innovative in her methods, sourcing many of her ideas from internet sites; she incorporates an array of educational games. Mandy is most comfortable with a natural learning ethos but has come to realize that, because of her children’s learning difficulties, they do better with some structure. She is single-minded in meeting each child’s needs. Homeschooling has been a lifeline for her, and her sons are now returning to more acceptable behaviours and achieving some positive learning experiences.
**Judi**

Judi is also from Perth and I also contacted her as a result of the NSW homeschooling petition. She has four adult children – two older sons with a thirteen year gap to the younger children (a boy and a girl). The older sons were conventionally schooled but she ‘discovered’ homeschooling when her youngest son began to struggle with schooling. While being softly spoken, she is very confident, not afraid to tackle any subject – calculus, Shakespeare, anything. Judi also preferred natural learning principles, though when asked to give a ‘typical day’ she admitted usually starting off with bookwork. Again, like Mandy, Judi was wonderfully creative in the learning she offered her children. She has three grandchildren and is seeking to be involved in their (home) education in the future.

**Jenny**

Jenny has an eight year old homeschooled son, Jarrad, and a daughter in Pre-primary at a local school. She contacted me after reading the Facebook information about my research that Mandy had posted. Jenny lives in a low socio-economic area of Perth with a high percentage of ethnic families attending the local schools. This was a factor in her decision to homeschool Jarrad whom, she felt, was not being sufficiently extended. Jenny relies on bookwork for Jarrad’s English and mathematics and, at the time of meeting, much of their focus was on the upcoming NAPLAN tests. However, bookwork is extensively supplemented by free or low-cost activities, groups and courses outside the home. Jenny did not finish high school and has to battle a recurring health problem but she prioritizes her children’s educational opportunities. Her house is eclectic and interesting, scattered with books, equipment, plants, displays and artwork – there is even a mural of the 2nd Punic War on the bathroom ceiling!
Larissa

I had met Larissa about five years ago when our sons had been on a camp together and discovered that they were both homeschooled. Larissa has a large family both in number and stature. Her children are tall and sports-focused and this is a dominant influence on their family life – there are many training sessions and matches to attend. The eldest son went to a small church school for a number of years but, even from early on, struggled a great deal, but with so many little children to care for, Larissa felt she could not homeschool him. She persevered until the situation become unsustainable and has homeschooled her children since. The older siblings have moved on to work or further studies, one son attends a senior campus to complete his high school studies and Larissa is currently homeschooling the younger two children. The youngest child, a girl of thirteen, has severe learning difficulties which has prompted their moderator to give her special flexibilities with regards to the requirements of the Australian Curriculum.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth, a friend of Larissa, is an older mum with a large family. Her oldest two children attended a Steiner school for several years but met with significant challenges. She began homeschooling when her eldest child was nine and now homeschools the youngest five children some of whom, she says, are well above their grade level academically while others struggle. Her children pursue a wide variety of interests and career paths which thus far include engineering, piloting, nursing, music and dance. This was the only family I met who did not embrace computer use – resorting to its use only when all other research and communication options had been exhausted. Elizabeth had deliberately sourced all manner of resources such as microscopes, globes, musical instruments, charts, language curricula, outdoor equipment (I even saw a unicycle) and an abundance of books on varied topics. She practises a loose natural learning approach with some structure in the younger years but is very much ready to work with each child at their particular level – nothing was forced.
**Jacinta**

Jacinta has four sons, all of primary school age. In 2013, she and her family immigrated to Australia. Jacinta always desired to homeschool her sons, however, at her husband’s request, the eldest son did attend school in their country of origin. When it became apparent that he was not meeting his potential at school, they began home education. None of the younger boys have attended a traditional school. Jacinta takes an extremely school-like approach to homeschooling, complete with workbooks, desks and blackboard, but does participate in many afterschool activities such as drawing, sports and drama. She is entirely confident that her approach is best for her children. Because she could not find a group which fitted her needs, Jacinta has organized her own homeschooling group which caters for around twenty children. It is through the website for this group that I made initial contact with her.

**Kate**

Kate lives on the south coast. She has two children, a son and a daughter, in the low to middle primary years. The family moved from Perth a year before our interview and are in the process of building their own home, living in a shed while this transpires. Her son had started in a community school in Perth but even this had proved too structured for them and, as she learned more about natural learning and home education, she realized this was what ‘fitted’ with her family. Kate does not direct her children’s studies at all or even suggest activities (she finds this “contrived”) but supports and facilitates them completely once they have shown an interest in something. Kate and her husband both have post-graduate degrees and are convinced that their children will also do well academically if they are left to flourish in their own way. They appeared to have a lot of visitors and regular contact with other homeschool families.
Mary

Mary and her husband work for a non-government organization. This work is central to their family life. Mary has a daughter who is currently undertaking further studies and runs her own ethically-conscious business. She has homeschooled her son, Austin, for five years since bullying incidents rendered school untenable. When she began home education, Mary chose to use a set curriculum provider but Austin found this very limiting so they now choose a more eclectic approach which has involved periods of work experience in a field of interest. Mary first contacted me, through a mutual friend, during this time of transition. Mary is a talented artist and both her children follow her artistic bent. This has meant that science and mathematics do not always come naturally to Austin so she has purposefully sought help to ensure that she covers these sufficiently.

Jane

Jane, her husband and several of their adult children work for the same NGO as Mary. As the two families work closely together and Jane’s youngest sons are of similar age to Austin, they also share many homeschool experiences, hence, their preference that I interview them together. Jane has eleven children, the older five being institutionally schooled until they moved to a country town where there was no Christian school within travelling distance. She now lives in Perth and homeschools her youngest three children, all boys of high school age. Two of these sons have marked learning difficulties and are struggling with learning to read. Bookwork is a constant battle for them. Teaching these two sons to read is Jane’s priority – she has tried many different methods and resources but is constantly searching for more effective means. Her moderator, however, insists that she broadens her focus.
**Gabriella**

Gabriella was educated in another country and has no first-hand experience of the education system here. She has two sons, aged 8 and 10 at the time of the interview. Over time she learned about the Western Australian school system and home education, and became convinced the latter was the preferred option. Consequently, her sons have never been to school. Gabriella contacted me in response to a post I left on a natural learning website while she was searching for a support group in her area. Since they were very young, she has read to them morning and evening and continues to do this, a time they all enjoy, but the boys have shown no interest in reading for themselves, nor of learning to write. The sons have the power of veto over every activity. Gabriella is not concerned as she is sure that they will learn to read and write when they are ready. She has recently registered and is finding her moderator’s expectations challenging.

**Helen**

Helen has one daughter, Amy, now in her upper primary years. She lives in the same area as Gabriella. Helen originally enrolled Amy in a Steiner school but this ceased after some particularly unsavoury issues at the school were dealt with poorly. I made contact with Helen through a friend of Jane. In the beginning homeschooling years, Helen preferred to use an approach which she termed ‘free-range’, following her daughter’s interests. However, in recent years, Helen has had increasing work commitments and Amy in enjoying more rigour so they are using a more structured approach – this coincided with the introduction of the Australian Curriculum. Helen was initially unaware of the details of the Australian Curriculum but, after listening to the complaints of many fellow home educators, investigated it thoroughly and ran an information session to help others in her area.
**Rachel**

Rachel, her 10 year old son, Caleb, and Caleb’s older sister live with Rachel’s mother, as well as various other members of the extended family – it is a very dynamic household of four generations. Rachel began homeschooling Caleb at the beginning of the 2013 school year and had been the subject of a newspaper article shortly after. Caleb has severe learning, speech and social difficulties and survived five years of schooling but made no friends and learned very little. Because of Caleb’s inability to cope with bookwork or absorb information easily, Rachel relies heavily on oral and experiential learning techniques. This is causing some friction with the moderator who would like to see more written work. They attend at least one homeschooling excursion a month and Rachel is looking to slowly increase Caleb’s social interactions in small groups.

**Conclusion**

From these descriptions, it is evident that these thirteen parents represent a wide spectrum of home educators – they come from a wide variety of backgrounds, represent many different motivations and methods and they are faced with an array of challenges; some of these participants are only just beginning their homeschooling journey, others are ‘old hands’. In Chapter 5, I explore common and relevant themes which emerged from the interviews concerning parents’ perceptions of learning and home education.
5. Parents’ Beliefs Regarding Learning and Home Education

Introduction

The vast majority of Western Australian children today are schooled in an institutional setting. Homeschooling, unless the result of health or locational necessity, is then a purposeful act away from the social norm – a decision which is rarely made lightly. Thus, parents inevitably launch into home education with certain, often strongly held, aspirations and beliefs. These, in turn, are a primary influence on the learning opportunities they offer their children. In this chapter I will explore the perceptions of thirteen homeschooling parents regarding home education and learning in general and examine the use of some of the practices they employ. While these vary greatly, there are some general trends which can be identified. The transcription conventions I have used are listed in Appendix E (p.202).

The presiding belief of all home educators

Because home education is practised by people from every walk of life and for vastly different reasons, it is difficult to make generalizations regarding what parents believe. One conviction, however, was affirmed by all parents who participated in this research – that home education is in the best interest of their child/ren. Many reasons were given to justify this belief. One justification underlined the desire to avoid the negatives of, or struggles associated with, mainstream schooling. Larissa provides one example of this sentiment:

…that's probably the whole point of homeschooling, is that people, whatever reason they start with, in the end, they want their children rounded and able to cope and not damaged by the negatives of school. And not damaged by bullying and peer pressure[,] I hate to think what would have happened to Gina, being so tall and a girl. I really hate to think what would have happened to her in the school system.
Kate simply said, “…the more time I spent at school the more I realized that I wanted more for my kids than that.”

Some participants cited academic problems as the reason they believed homeschooling was their best option. For example:

Jane – …I’m really glad that we’re homeschooling because I think they would really struggle and get left behind at school. Because it’s just – it takes a full-time [.

Megan – Alex and Henry?

Jane – Yeah, because I really have to sit with Henry all morning and in a large class,[.] Alex went to school just for a term, to the Christian school. His teacher was a really good friend of mine and she was so good with him. She sat him right at the front of the class but even after that term she said, "I think he’s better off at home." Because things just moved too fast in the classroom.

Mary offers a more compelling illustration though sadly, one of several expressing similar incidents:

Mary – I pulled Austin out because he’d been bullied for years. And it got to the point where,[.] we had no idea that the bullying was affecting him so much.

Megan – So you knew something was going on?

Mary – You know, too many nights of him in tears, "I don’t want to go to school tomorrow." And then the following year he wanted to apply for the visual and performing arts course at the local high school. So we did that. At first there were two days of workshops. The first day of workshops I took him up there and he just wanted to run and hide. I managed to get him to stay the first day but the second day I didn’t even get him up to the school. He just sobbed and sobbed on my shoulder and I ended up bringing him to this MacDonald’s and sitting. Because we’d prayed about whether or not he should apply for the course and felt God said, "Yes." And he said, "Mum, maybe God said ‘yes’ so you could know how much pain I was in." And I said, "Yeah." ‘Cause I had no
idea how much. And I feel that there’s still some coming out every now and then.

Megan – Is that because there were children at this course, they were the same children that had come from his school?

Mary – It was just a school. School to him was the same wherever now because of that. The school he was going to had about 300 kids from about 64 different nationalities. It had a lot of refugee children and I’m not sure how much counselling was happening, just from some of the things the kids said and did. Like, he had a threat one day and I didn’t find out until later when he was going to bed. He was in about Grade 2 or 3. He said something the child in front of him didn’t like and the child said, "If you say that again, my dad will come and take you out of school and out of the country and you will never come back again."

Megan – That was in Grade 2 or 3 and you pulled him out when he was in Grade 7?

Mary – At the end of Grade 6. But I had no idea it was going on so constantly. The teachers would constantly be telling me that he was the first person who would put his hand up to help the guys who had bullied him if they needed help. And so, it just got to the point where it was too much and my, yeah, he’s got something there, the resilience goes back but he needs, he needed the support and I just had no idea it had gone that far. So, yeah,[.] he hasn’t gone back since.

A number of parents believed homeschooling to be the best option for their children on the basis that parents have a greater knowledge of, and investment in, their children than a paid teacher ever could. Of the many such comments, Helen said:

I still think the parent is the best teacher – you know your child the best and how they learn and what turns them, you know, switches them on, what switches them off.
Conceptualizations of learning

The spectrum

Armed with this presiding belief, how a parent conceptualizes learning is one of the next most salient influences on the decisions they make regarding their children’s education. However, throughout the interviews, I experienced a broad spectrum of, sometimes opposing, views amongst the participants. The basis of these differences appears to stem from each parent’s belief of how structured learning experiences should be and how much input children should have in their own learning. Figure 2 shows my understanding of the continuum of approaches of my thirteen participants based on their learning philosophies.

On the far left of the spectrum, two women were dedicated to a natural learning ethos in its purest form – they believed in a completely child-driven, unscripted approach to learning. I will give examples of Gabriella and Kate’s beliefs throughout this chapter. Jacinta, to the right at the other extreme, believed that if education didn’t look school-like and teacher-driven, it was not real learning. Jacinta said, “I’m strict with their work and stuff also I don’t mess around with work. It’s important for them to work and learn because their future is in my hands.” And:

…if I'm walking in for school time, we do school work. If my phone rings, it can ring the whole day. While I'm busy I won't answer it. And if I get an email, I won't reply. That's how important it is for me, for the kids to do their work.

I perceived the rest of the women to be dispersed across the continuum as shown in Figure 2. It should be noted that these stances are changeable and those who had been homeschooling for some time usually described a change of approach as they...
grew into their role as teacher and parent – this was most often a move toward the ‘natural learning’ end of the continuum. Judi provides a typical example of this:

...we moved on fairly quickly from structured to unstructured. I had a really good wakeup call from a friend of ours. I love this. We used to do all our stuff around the table, much like this in our living room/dining room, but being the Isle of Man, being a sort of close development, there was a public walkway right past our window there and people could look in. We had a friend, an older guy, who used to go for walks every day, and I met him one evening, we were out somewhere, and he said, "Are you still doing that homeschooling thing?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Yeah, I see you when I walk by." And he said, "You all look miserable." And I thought, "Oh, how awful is that?" And it was true because I was trapped in this sort of school-at-home thing because it was all I really knew. And it was only 6 months in or something like that and we were recognising that we actually weren't really enjoying this. So we ditched the [structured curriculum].

Helen and Larissa were exceptions to this trend. Helen felt that her daughter desired more structure as she approached high school age. She said, “'Cause she's needing more, she wants more structure now. So, I’m slowly adding in more structure and it gives me a break.” Larissa found she was able to offer more structure now that only two of her children were being homeschooled:

Megan – I’m trying to get a feel for how structured you are, you know.

Larissa – I think in the early years, not very structured, when I had lots of little children, you know, it just felt like a sea of nappies and pencils and books and,[.] I'm getting much more structured as I get older, well, and I get less children.
That's me personally,[.] with less people to focus on.

It’s complicated
How homeschooling mothers conceptualize learning is complicated. There seem to be several closely related concepts involved. Consider this reasoning by Jenny (she is explaining how she works out a weekly timetable for eight-year-old Jarrad):
Jenny – Yeah, so basically, I just kind of work out what we’ve got to do and then put in, like, typing, is a usual thing that we put in a couple of times a week.

Megan – So, touch typing?

Jenny – Touch typing. Yeah, he’s learning to type…

Megan – That’s a great skill to have.

Jenny – I know, it’s something, I thought, ”Well, what things do you need to have? You need to have reading and writing and all that kind of– I’m not doing critical, ah, cursive writing. We’re just doing printing. I thought, ”I don’t need to teach him that ‘cause if he wants to he can learn it later on.” Most people I know don’t do cursive writing anyway, they do printing or they do typing.

Megan – At school?

Jenny – Yeah, they just don’t really do it. Unless, yeah, it’s not so important and also the kids don’t do it. I figured he needs to improve his printing first of all before he does very much cursive writing. Yeah, there’s a few things that I’m not doing, like we don’t do very much art because he’s just not interested in art, so I don’t kind of go, ”Oo, I must program in art.” Art just happens to fall in when he does something, and he doesn’t realize he’s doing it.

Here Jenny demonstrates that she has given thought to what knowledge and skills Jarrad needs for his future. She has determined that there are some things that are important and some things that are not. The important things are then programmed in – she ensures they get covered. The less important things may be addressed incidentally and if they’re not, that’s OK – gaps can be filled if the need arises.

Elizabeth expresses similar perceptions:

Megan – So, would you be happy if they said, ”There’s this lump of knowledge your child must have, you’ve got ten years to cover it.” Would you be happy with that?

Elizabeth – It depends what the knowledge is. There are some things we aren’t going to teach. Yeah, I don’t know. ’Cause really we homeschool because we want to impart to our kids things that we think are important and the things
that are important to them. I mean, they show us by their interests what's important to them. If we miss something then we really feel that, as Christians we think, “Well, God’s going to show us. If He wants a child to be doing something then it just comes across our path.” And we think, "Oh, yeah, that looks great, that will work really well." And we do it and we don't think that they're going to miss out or that there's anything that we're going to overlook.

Megan – So, there are some things you may, it depends what it is, you may choose not to do but what about the other things that you might add to it [the curriculum]? …You would still supplement it with things that interested them?

Elizabeth – Well, yeah,…because the stuff that they do for the whole rest of the day is that stuff anyway, and I may not be directing it or recording it or doing anything with it but it doesn't mean they're not learning. And they're learning it because it’s interesting or important to them. That's why they're doing, you know, cello practice out of hours, or whatever. Whatever they're interested in, they're going to do it. So, it may, I mean, they are learning 12 hours a day anyway but not necessarily stuff, well, definitely not stuff that I've said they have to do, 'cause that usually finishes by lunch time. The stuff that Mum’s said, "This is important, we need to do this." And the kid says, "Oh, I don't want to do it." And I say, "Well, that's bad luck because I think it's important."

Again, the participant expresses that some important instruction must be prioritized while less essential lessons can and will fit in around that. Again, there is recognition that any gaps that exist won’t be problematic. Elizabeth also introduces two further concepts. Firstly, she addresses the importance of children’s interests in their learning. Jenny also mentions this as a reason for not programming in art lessons. Secondly, Elizabeth explicates that children learn through what they naturally do – much of this learning doesn’t necessarily fit Mum’s priorities but it is, nevertheless, learning. These themes are recurrent throughout the interviews.

These excerpts illustrate that there are numerous concepts which influence parents’ understanding of learning and many factors which are, in turn, influenced by these
conceptualizations. Attempting to isolate all of these inputs and effects is virtually impossible and will not, I believe, produce an accurate portrait of the significant dependence and overlap of all these factors or the broader picture they construct. Though still inadequate, I feel a more expedient strategy is to examine a number of broad themes which naturally and repeatedly emerged throughout the interviews and are prevalent in homeschooling literature. By identifying issues which parents themselves address, I hope to ascertain the aspects of learning most likely to be impacted by the mandate to use prescribed curriculum. Some recurrent themes are: the purpose of education, what constitutes essential learning, the importance of a child’s readiness for learning and the benefits of personalized learning experiences, conversational learning and contextual learning opportunities. I will expound my participants’ views on these topics in the remainder of this chapter.

The purpose of education
What is the purpose of education? A pervading concept throughout my interviews was that parents want to prepare their children for the future – their future. They want their children to develop useful skills and a love of learning which will enable them to pursue careers of their choice and live as happy, functioning adults. Larissa exemplifies this sentiment:

“Well, education is to learn how to learn…” and, “They’ll all come out the end being able, you know, being skilled for something. And that’s probably the whole point of homeschooling, is that people, whatever reason they start with, in the end, they want their children rounded and able to cope.”

The younger years
This seemed to be manifest differently depending on the age of a homeschooled child. For those with younger children, of primary school age, there was an emphasis on teaching basic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic and on exposing them to a variety of subjects which could later be narrowed as specific interests developed. Judi expresses this in the following quote. We were discussing her move away from using a structured curriculum and her emerging methods:
I think pretty soon you just start to see that the kids are— you must have seen this, that kids are learning, you can't stop them and there's all these areas of interest [...] and it looks in a way— people kind of go, "Well, they're flitting." Well, yes they are, they do flit from one thing to another and they sample and they check it out and they go, "Oh, that's not really for me, I'm not bothered about that one."

A little later Judi describes one method she used to expose her children to a wide variety of materials. She starts here by speaking about a well-known homeschool commentator:

She talks about strewing, you know, you get interesting books and leave them lying around. I mean, everyone does this whether they're homeschooled or school-schooled. So, we've always had a globe. And it's always, sort of been there and things that are interesting, you just bring them into the house and they start to go, "Oh, what's this? What does it do? How do you—?" you know.

Although Elizabeth doesn’t use the term ‘strewing’, she describes the same technique:

Elizabeth — …there's heaps of stuff around here — books on every subject you can imagine and we've got microscopes and all kinds of stuff, so, anything they want to find out about, I guess, they have the resources to go with that.

Megan — And you've deliberately resourced—?

Elizabeth — It's just all there. Yep, so whatever they want to do, they can and if we don't use it, we don't use it. Often I'll get, like, we have the 'Rosetta Stone'²¹ for German because somebody way back thought they might like to do German and it has sat there all this time. When it actually came, we thought, "Oh, no, I don't really think I'll do this." So, it's just sitting there and then Esther thought that she'd like to do some German, so she's picked it up and because it's just

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²¹ A specific language course.
around and available they think, "Oh, that sounds interesting, yeah, I'll have a look at it." And she may or may not go on with it. If she thinks it's not that beneficial to her she'll stop. I don't really care. And if she does want to do it then she will. So, I don't sort of insist that they do all those extra things…

Elizabeth sums up this approach, referring to her youngest son: “…we give him lots of opportunities and then eventually they find something that they enjoy doing.”

Jacinta also feels that children should be exposed to a wide variety of material though she takes a much more parent-controlled view. She said:22

Well, I feel they have to learn anything. I can’t miss out on something because then the knowledge they learn, I don't want them to learn half of it. I'd rather let them learn everything and then out of that they can see what they enjoy but if they’re older. I know Karl, he likes history stuff. If we go to the library he always gets books from history and then he sit and he look through the pages and look at the pictures and reads some of them. So, I think what I've done already, I can see what they are enjoying. I won’t just do that because they are only enjoying that. They have to know everything. Because in the future they can decide if they want to go on with it or just leave it. But then I know I have covered everything. That is for me, more important.

Whatever the approach, there is an underlying recognition that children should maintain the desire to learn – they should not be ‘turned off’ education through poor or harsh teaching. A little earlier, Jacinta had expressed this opinion:

Jacinta – If you start at the beginning with your own kids you can form the structures. The first three years of your school, your young years, is more important and if that is not formed, the foundation is not formed correctly, then in future it will just go bad. That’s how I see it. So, they need the foundation right to get better in the future.

22 Jacinta has recently immigrated to Australia. English is not her first language.
Megan – So, you mean academic, you know, they need to be able to learn this or do you mean their attitude towards it?

Jacinta – No, actually, the whole <long pause>… I don’t know how to say it, um, physical, emotional and from, because, easily they can be snapped and their emotions and their skills can be torn apart. If, if some teachers teach them wrongly at the end of the day you can’t fix it.

Megan – So, they need to be nurtured. Is that the right word?

Jacinta – Yah.

Judi, talking about ‘visiting speakers’ explicitly addressed this love of learning:

…the other thing that we would do for, I supposed more arts or technology or whatever, is we’d look around and find people who were doing things that were interesting… And we’d import them or we’d go to them. But it was always, “I will not let someone teach my children unless they have a passion. I’m not interested in people communicating information to my kids. They have to communicate love for what they’re doing.” Otherwise, it’s just as dry as dust.

Gabriella considered pleasure in learning as paramount to educational success – her sons did not engage in anything they did not enjoy. Gabriella explains this here:

…It’s human nature – when you force someone to do something they are going to react against it – they are not going to want to do it. And this is why there are so many people who don’t read, because they were forced to read at school. To me it’s so obvious.

Jacinta and Gabriella are diametrically opposed in their methodologies and practices and yet both are committed to ensuring their sons are given every chance of academic success. Parents of younger homeschooled children are focused on setting a platform of success for learning, of teaching the ‘basics’ (this will be addressed further in ‘Core Curriculum’ pp.102-103) and of offering children a smorgasbord of content. This is all aimed at preparing them for more specialized learning as they progress toward the high school years.
The teen years

Parents of high-school-aged children principally viewed their role as facilitating a child’s move toward prospective employment or further study. Larissa, Elizabeth, Mary, Jane and Sharyn all had older children whose homeschooling had included some TAFE\(^{23}\) studies. The principal reason for this was to gain a recognized qualification which would open doors to higher studies or employment opportunities. As Larissa said of the general adult education TAFE certificate completed by her older daughters, “…that was a good thing to do because it gives you a certificate that 'out there' recognize.”

Elizabeth expressed the same sentiment — in Year 11 all her children do the same general TAFE certificate that Larissa used. This allows them entry to a specialized course for Year 12 which, in turn, facilitates admission to university in their chosen field. In the following extract, Elizabeth had outlined the aspirations of her fourth child and now turns her attention to her fifth child’s future:

Elizabeth – So, with Esther, Esther wants to nurse.

Megan – And how old is Esther?

Elizabeth – She’s Year 10. And she’s doing biology this year. We may have a look at chemistry, we may not. You know the elementary Apologia books have now got a chemistry and physics book, so I got her just to read through that this year. We might start chemistry next year or she might just start human biology because then she’ll probably do Cert 4 in nursing, [...] nursing science, I think it’s called, at TAFE. She’ll probably do that in Year 12, so she may not even do Year 12, so we’ll just make sure we’ve got the human biology covered before then in case she decides. So she doesn’t really need to do any more schooling.

Megan – Is nursing science, is that a bit different to nursing? I don’t really know.

\(^{23}\) TAFE - Technical and Further Education is a provider of post-secondary education principally focused on vocational training.
Elizabeth – It’s just, it’s a TAFE course, a Cert 4 one and you can use that then to get into the bachelor of nursing at Curtin [University]. So, because she’s homeschooled, she won’t, it will be harder to get into the bachelor course with no formal qualification, so doing a Cert 4 will be easy, she’ll be easily able to get into it. We get all of them to do the Cert 3 in general adult education when they’re in Year 11 and so that gives them a recognized Cert 3 and then that’s how Brad got into the diploma of engineering from the Cert 3…

Mary, too, had extensively researched possible pathways for her son, Austin. Near the end of our conversation she summed up her aims for Austin’s education that year – that it should be directly applicable to his future direction. She said:

…this is the year, we’re like, “What’s next?” I don’t necessarily see the point of doing school if it’s just school. If I can find a way for him to be going into what he’s going into, it really makes more sense.

Toward this end, Mary gave detailed explanations of the costs and requirements of courses they were considering, during which she stated, “I’m trying to work out how to get him where he needs to go to do what he wants to do and I’m not[,] I haven’t totally got it yet.” Her sole motivation for this extensive enquiry was to find the course which best suited Austin and ensure that he completed any prerequisites. She has concerns about his mathematical abilities; this is a factor in the choice of course. Do they require a pass in mathematics? If so, how can this be demonstrated? At the time, Mary was thinking that Austin should sit the Year 10 OLNA24 tests to achieve a pass in mathematics though I understand she is now considering a course which allows entry by portfolio. In addition to investigating possible academic pathways for Austin, Mary had also organised two different work experience stints for him to develop a more informed idea of the specialty he might like to pursue. This level of thought and investigation was typical of parents with older homeschooled children.

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24 OLNA – The On-line Literacy and Numeracy Assessment provides one path for demonstrating the minimum standard of literacy and numeracy required to achieve the Western Australian Certificate of Education (The Western Australian graduation certificate of secondary schooling).
The focus of parents with older home educated children seems to move from ensuring the acquisition of basic skills and knowledge to directly equipping them with content and skills specifically relevant to their future. Parents, at this stage, appear to be working alongside each child to enhance their prospects of entering pre-employment studies in a desired field.

**Core curriculum**

As discussed in ‘Conceptualizations of Learning’ (pp.93-96), both Jenny and Elizabeth expressed the need for children to learn core content and skills particularly in the primary years of home education. This, to some degree, was universally acknowledged by all participants. For example, Sharyn said:

> Oh, definitely, I mean, especially with him and his learning difficulties, to get his interest, you’ve got to have interest in the subject. I mean, of course there are exceptions, you know—"Oh, I don’t want to do maths." "Well, I’m sorry you have to, to be able to function in life." You know. <Laughs> There are exceptions.

Likewise, Mandy said, “I understand that they have to learn certain things, in maths, right, we’re going to end up with most kids knowing, because there are some things that are important…”

There was, however, a wide disparity in what my participants thought constituted essential knowledge and skills. Almost everyone overtly identified reading as the key to educational success. Even the most ardent natural learning advocates conceded that reading was one skill that all children must acquire. I will address this further in the following section. Many parents also mentioned writing and mathematics as key capabilities for children to learn. In addition to the ‘three R’s’, various participants thought that some understanding of history, geography and science was important although specific content was never suggested. Of note, the two mothers who had immigrated to Australia and spoke English as their second language, both emphasized the need for children to learn Australian geography and history and both viewed English as the priority subject. Jacinta even went to pains to source Australian educational computer programs so her sons could develop ‘Aussie’ pronunciation.
To highlight the importance of these ‘basics’, a number of participants specifically aimed to cover these topics first thing each morning before moving on to more peripheral subjects. For example Sharyn offered: “…we tend to get maths and English out of the way first because then if something happens to the rest of the day then at least we’ve covered the basics.”

**Reading**

The importance of reading and of books in general to home educating parents cannot be overstated and deserves explicit attention. During the interviews, I did not specifically ask about reading and books unless it emerged naturally and yet on every occasion bar one (Mary, whose one homeschooled child was in Year 10) each parent communicated that reading is an invaluable life skill which should be cultivated deliberately. Libraries were frequently and specifically mentioned as resources they commonly used. I note, however, that parents distinguished between reading books and doing bookwork. Where the topic arose, bookwork was most often viewed with negativity. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Kate provides a cogent example of the importance homeschooling parents place on reading. She is completely dedicated to a natural learning approach. I share this excerpt to provide her understanding of this ethos:

*Megan* – *And do you take anything further with crafts or, or--?*

*Kate* – *I don't do anything contrived… I facilitate their learning, I encourage their learning and I'm eager and I'm motivated and I'm interested in what they do. We're together all day and I absolutely support them but I don't do something where my daughter might say, "What's the capital of England?" I'll say, "It's London. OK, let's draw a picture of Big Ben. That will be fun to do. And we can get the craft box out and we can make a big collage of Big Ben. That will be fun wouldn't it?" If she says, "I'd really like to make a picture about Big Ben." I'll say, "Great, what shall we use? We could do collage or we could do paint or we could do whatever." But I wouldn't suggest it as a learning activity.*
Kate is entirely led by her children’s curiosity – she does not suggest any learning activities at all – except where reading is concerned. Reading is different. Reading is important. Kate admitted:

…at the moment I’m sitting down and I’m doing a lot of practice. Quite a lot. I'm getting my daughter to do reading everyday ‘cause she's just getting to the stage where she's starting to really make sense of reading. So we sit down every day and read a book, she will read a book to me. But that's the only sort of structured, formalized activity that we do.

**Educational gaps**

In ‘going it alone’ without connection to a professional education hierarchy for direction, parents who educate children at home are exposing them to the possible formation of educational gaps. As shown in the opening excerpts by Jenny and Elizabeth, parents themselves acknowledge this prospect. Jenny and Elizabeth both recognized that there would, in all likelihood, be some skills or content missing from their children’s repertoire but that these would be easily bridged should the need arise. I think it important to recognize that they are both referring to gaps in, what they see as, ‘negotiable’ curriculum and not in areas they consider to be core skills – Elizabeth makes it clear that she will ensure that content she considers important will be covered and Jenny is specifically addressing art and cursive writing.

Potential educational gaps can be classified as either skills or content. I will consider these separately for the remainder of this section, commencing with skills. Below are two excerpts discussing skills which had not been acquired during the homeschooling years – firstly essay writing, then computer use.

*Judi* – We read and we read and we read. I didn’t enforce writing. Writing happened on occasion. Carolyn had a spell when she just wanted to write stories – she wrote stories – Jonathan, not so much. But when he first started at uni and wrote his first essay, it was an H D. And I think it’s just reading. It’s just having a good feel for good literature and, you know, he wasn’t forced to write endless essays just to make a point. I mean, I remember him saying to me when
he got to uni and they told him, "Oh, we'll teach you how to write essays." And he goes, "Oh, that was complicated, wasn't it? – Not." You begin it, you do it, you end it. Yeah. And he was old enough to understand it. It wasn't a problem.

Because Jonathan was older when learning to write an essay, he quickly and easily acquired the skill without the need for years of practice. Elizabeth felt the same about computing. She was the only parent I interviewed who did not encourage her children to use computers. This is her reasoning:

_Megan – What about the computer, do you use that as a resource very much?_

_Elizabeth – Not for the kids. I use it. And the older kids, we don't really, like, Esther’s doing geography that requires research and she just comes to me and says, "I need to find out these things." And I'll sit down with her and we'll do it together. 'Cause we don't let our kids use the internet until they're around 18. And even they don't use the computer much until they've really finished school either. So, I don't actually do computer stuff with them._

_Megan – So, not CD ROMs or anything either?_

_Elizabeth – No. I think it's just a distraction to most of our kids – with kids who have processing issues there's too much going on, on most of those. They're better off with something very plain and direct rather than that stuff._

_Megan – But you use it as a resource, the computer that is, to find out information?_

_Elizabeth – Yep. But the kids don't use it on their own. And they haven't had any trouble. Sandy did a lot of computer work in TAFE. Like with photography she learnt all the light-shop and to do everything but she didn't have any trouble at all. From going, basically from not using a computer, or barely using a computer, to knowing how to do it well was just easy, I think. Kids don't have an issue with it so I don't think it's something that they need years of practice at._

Again, a skill needed in later studies was acquired quickly and easily. So, parents generally accept that there are core skills, such as reading, which must be learned
and go to lengths to ensure these are assimilated, but they also classify some skills as peripheral. Parents may or may not teach these but are generally confident that any missed learning experiences can easily be attained later if necessary.

The concept of missing content was not so clear cut. Jacinta, in a previous excerpt (p.98), said that she thought her sons needed to “learn everything”, she “can’t miss out on something” and she didn’t “want them to learn half of it.” Conversely, several parents reasoned that very little content taught at school is retained for long, so specific content really doesn’t matter. Kate summarizes this opinion:

So, I think, yes, part of learning for us is really, it’s not just about imparting facts to our kids at all, in the hope that they are somehow going to retain it into adulthood which they most likely won’t anyway. It’s actually about teaching them how to learn and how to look things up and how to be questioning about the sources of information and all of those sorts of issues…

The majority of parents, however, fell somewhere between these two views – they believed that a broad range of subjects should be covered. Here Helen describes a typical approach:

Helen – …with the eclectic or natural approach you have to be thinking all the time to check that you’re covering things and it’s a lot more work on the teacher.

Megan – OK. So, did you often stand back and have a look at the range of things that you were doing and say, "OK, maybe I need to do some of this now."?

Helen – All the time. Yeah, yeah. Well, I think you have to otherwise it’s not teaching…

While the majority of participants tried to give their children a good coverage of content, there were none besides Jacinta who expressed concern that important concepts might be missed. Rather, as in Elizabeth’s first quote (pp.94-95), most felt that if something was interesting or important to a child they would learn it.
Kate expresses this beautifully, so I will give her the last word on gaps in education:

…there's lots of things that my children are exposed to and learning about that they wouldn’t be at school and there would be lots of things that school children know that my children won’t. And that’s fine because— that’s OK. That's how life is. And things that my kids are particularly interested in my kids know how to find out about and explore. My kids are naturally curious, they love learning and they love exploring things and they will be more than well equipped to be able to learn whatever they want or need to learn in their life. I’m a hundred percent confident of that.

**Individualized learning**

The overwhelming majority of home educating parents aim to give their children the best education they can – to make it relevant and of high quality. They know their children’s likes and dislikes, gifts and challenges, character and attitudes and they use this knowledge to provide tailor-made learning opportunities. Home education is, fundamentally, a move away from mass-delivered teaching toward personalized learning. We have already seen two examples in “The Teen Years” (pp.100-102) where two mothers shared how they had purposely explored a range of options and mapped out potential paths for their teenagers to maximize their chances of entering their chosen field.

For some parents being able to best meet their children’s academic needs meant presenting information in a way which best suited them. Some parents went to extraordinary lengths and used exceptionally innovative approaches to present information in ways their children could best absorb. This was particularly so for parents of children with learning difficulties. For others, meeting their children’s educational needs meant providing experiences in a timely fashion, at an appropriate level, as they were ready for them.
Readiness

The concept of a child’s readiness to learn emerged as an important issue, being specifically mentioned by ten of my thirteen participants. Mandy, for example, is passionate when it comes to this subject. Although her three children are all in the lower primary years, their family has twice tried schooling at a community school with disastrous results. Mandy now sees home education as a lifeline for her family – she feels they have no other option and is committed to meeting her children at their point of need as can be seen in this excerpt:

Mandy – …what my kid needs to learn within her 7 years of primary schooling for example, why can’t she do it when she wants to? [...] Why can’t I do it when they’re ready? I don’t like that they’re telling me exactly what to do and exactly when and then this year they have to learn how to read a clock, and I’m like, "Cool, I can tick that one off, I don’t have to do that one for the next 3 years." It just doesn’t make sense. And, I’m happy to teach them how to read and write, sure, but if they’re not capable of doing it, why would I force them to do it?

Megan – So, you think as an end, as an outcome, it’s fine, but there needs to be flexibility within the time frame?

Mandy – Yes. Yes. And pre-primary outcomes are ridiculous. For a kid who has just theoretically started schooling, who still wants to play and [...] pre-primary <makes a ‘raspberry’ sound> that should be all you want and to be honest, if you’re doing your homeschooling in a way that your child responds to, you could do one, two or three years like this <clicks fingers>. But if they’re not ready to do it, they’re not going to do it. I hate that.

Several women highlighted the lack of their children’s readiness for the academic rigour of formal schooling as the principal reason they began homeschooling. Larissa, for example, found that her eldest son, John, was struggling with some elements of early schooling. Rather than pulling him out, she persevered as she had two youngsters and a baby to care for and felt that she could not do justice to John’s education at home on top of these responsibilities. Larissa explains further:
Megan – And it wasn’t really academic, well, sort of academic issues, it was more the stress?

Larissa – Well, it turned very quickly into academic issues. Yeah, it was both. It shouldn’t have ever[,] you know, he is a late developer, he should have been, would have been far better off[,] he learned to read very easily but writing was just huge and in some ways we could have left him until he was 9 or 10 to write. I don’t think it would have done[,] the Moore’s theory of ‘better late than early’ and he would have been far better under that system but by the time I homeschooled him it was too late, unfortunately.

Previously, she detailed the origin of John’s schooling struggles:

Larissa – …she [John’s teacher] put him between a clever little girl here and a clever little girl there on the other side and thought that would motivate him to write. So all he did was he got his name on top of the worksheet and looked right, she’d finished, he looked left, she’d finished and concluded that he was dumb. And slow. And I think she reinforced that with him.

Megan – She thought it was a motivational issue?

Larissa – I think so. I don’t think she knew what to do with him.

Larissa goes on to explain that John, now twenty-two, still struggles with issues she attributes to the trauma experienced in those early years of schooling. She said, “The damage was done. I don’t think he’s ever recovered, in terms of the damage to his self-esteem. I was not able to reverse it with homeschool.” Larissa gave the impression that she still carried guilt about not removing John from school earlier before the irreparable damage was done – there was a definite sense of “if only…”

Rachel also took her son, Caleb, out of school and wished she had done so earlier because of the difficulties that arose from his lack of readiness. Caleb had attended school for five years but could not yet read. Rachel then “almost demanded” that the school allow Caleb to repeat Grade 3 and when they refused she turned to home education. Here, she begins by talking about Caleb’s social anxiety:
Rachel – …he didn’t speak almost at all and definitely not well enough for the teacher or most of the children to understand him. He couldn’t really communicate in class, he couldn’t socialize the way other kids could. So, it was quite a daunting environment for him.

Megan – So how long did you persevere?

Rachel – Oh, we stayed all through kindy. He actually went all the way through to the end of Year 3 before I decided, “No, this is just killing my son.” He was coming home miserable. He was, for the four years he was in school, kindy to year three, that’s five years he was in school, almost every day there were tears at the beginning of school because he did not want to go. Ever. And he did not want to do any of the homework or the reading or anything. I would always go with him at the beginning of class, every day to do the reading. Nightmare. Yeah, and it was heartbreaking and he was just deflated so much.

Megan – But if he wasn’t speaking very much, how did you notice it?

Rachel – Well, kids are normally bubbly and bright and outgoing and want to have a lot of fun and he just wasn’t. He was a person in depression like you’d see people miserable, not wanting to get out of bed, not wanting to shower and get dressed and that sort of thing and that’s what he was living and it was, it just felt so wrong. And I didn’t realize how bad it was until the week we started homeschooling when it switched. A complete transformation when we started homeschooling.

Having taken Caleb out of school and begun to work with him at his own pace and in a way that was Caleb-friendly, Rachel noticed a revolutionary change – a much happier result than for Larissa.

Some parents believed that ‘readiness’ included a child’s willingness to learn. This was particularly true of those families toward the natural learning end of the continuum. We have already seen that Gabriella believed learning would only be successful for her sons if they enjoyed what they were doing (p.99). She explains this further:
I’m not going to force the kids to do something they don't want to do. I will encourage them, I will ask them, but I think forcing them is counterproductive. And I actually know some mums who homeschool, who unschool, who said this. They did try in the beginning and then for years the kid did not want to do that because he remembered that Mum was so pushy. And if they are going to listen to me and respect what I tell them, I have to be very careful with that. And I told [the moderator] that. See, I want to be very careful not to be coercive.

Kate was also dedicated to natural learning methods and committed to providing educational opportunities to her children as they showed interest. In the following extract she reveals that she is grateful she took this approach with her son’s reading.

Kate had just listed novels her son likes to read:

Kate – …he's read, just, lots of stuff. And he started reading quite late, very late really. He was probably 8 before he could really read himself and, I mean, if he'd been in school he would have been in remedial class and he would have been having… special education lessons and all the rest of it… all of that sort of early intervention stuff with children.

Megan – But, he's obviously caught up now if he's reading those sized books.

Kate – Oh, completely. And it's something that he loves whereas if it had been something that it had been pointed out to him that he wasn’t very good at and he should be better at already and he needs extra help with it and he's already failing, he'd probably hate it now. So, and for his personality, he's a child who gets to things in his own time when he's ready and he always has been and he's got quite strong needs for autonomy and self-choice. You know, that doesn't work that well with a school environment. Yeah, I feel that he's probably, it's probably really beneficial to him just to have been allowed to get there in his own time and, the idea that all children should be doing the same thing at the same time is completely unrealistic… It's so unimaginative. It's so restrictive. And it just can't possibly work for everybody. So, some people will inevitably fail in something like that and as soon as you start failing, you set yourself up for being a failure. Or, you are set up for being a failure.
It is important to many participants that their children are permitted to flourish in their own time, as they are ready. However, to some parents, this necessitated accessing education before their young children were legally entitled to do so. Interestingly, Mandy and Rachel, who both expressed that their sons were not ready for formal schooling at the required age, also had older daughters who, they felt, were ready for school well before formal schooling would normally begin. Both these mothers searched for a school for their three-year-old daughters. Rachel used to drive a two hour round trip just so Cayla could attend a three year old kindergarten. Mandy was unable to source any schooling for her three year old Tara whom she described as “bright as anything.” You can sense her frustration in this excerpt:

I had been pushing the year before because Tara was so::: ready and I had the two little ones and I couldn’t extend her ‘cause I had a kid I was feeding all the time. So, I was ringing around asking, “Can I put her in your school?” “No, she’s not old enough.” “Well, test her. You know, test her to do it. She needs to go to school. She is ready for school.” And they’re like, “No.” And they said that she can’t go to school. So, I’m like, *ooaahh. I ended up going to a local 3 year old program just at a local family centre…

Similarly, Jenny and Jacinta both explained that they were motivated to homeschool after they had sent their eldest child (both boys) to school but found their sons were not being challenged academically. In fact, both felt their sons went backwards in school. Jenny said:

…they just weren’t expecting him to do as well as he could do. I knew he could do better and I was going in and helping and kind of going, “I know he can do better. I know he can achieve more than this.”

These extracts suggest that home educating parents from across the learning-methods spectrum highly value the capacity to present learning opportunities to their children at their specific level of ability, whatever that may be.
Targeting interests
For many parents, personalizing their children’s learning experiences not only incorporated when to learn but also the choice of what they learned. For some this meant deliberately choosing specific topics as a vehicle for learning, to which they knew their child would respond. For others it involved adopting a ‘hands off’ approach and allowing their child to direct learning pathways. Choosing content was always done within the framework of parents’ beliefs regarding core curriculum as discussed earlier (pp.102-103).

From my interviews, one of the more striking demonstrations of facilitating a child’s interest was the menagerie owned by Helen and nine-year-old Amy (this was a memorable moment for me):

Megan – And any other particular resources that she really enjoys using or uses quite frequently?

Helen – Ah, probably not anything, I mean, we do lots of art stuff, creative stuff. The animals are a big, end up being a big part of homeschooling.

Megan – So, you have dogs plus, [.]?

Helen – Ah, yeah, two dogs, two snakes, four lizards–

[At this stage I turned to where Helen was pointing, and just a couple of metres away from me were the two snakes in large glass aquarium-like displays – I just hadn’t noticed them before.]

Megan – Oh, you’ve got snakes.

Helen – One cat, we’re growing fish to eat. She’s really into her reptiles. Oh, that’s a passion actually, I forgot to mention she’s really into her reptiles so, yeah, there are two pythons over there.

Megan – Do you think she will pursue that at a later stage? Do you think that’s where she’s heading?

Helen – Yeah, I actually think she will. So, I wouldn’t be surprised if she did become a reptile specialist. Nothing to do with me, that one.
Helen had also forgotten to mention the rats they were breeding in cages, just outside the backdoor, to feed the reptiles! Amy had a passion, she loved reptiles, and her mother had gone to great lengths to facilitate her interest as part of her education.

Rachel, whose son had many learning difficulties found that a topic of interest could encourage Caleb to attempt tasks that would not normally be within his comfort zone. She explained that there was little point in just going to an exhibition because:

"I don't know if he would come away having learnt too much from it. Because he wouldn't let me read the plaques to him and things like that so he wouldn't be engaged in what it is he's looking at."

However, all that changed when it came to penguins –

"...at the moment he's fascinated by penguins so if we go to the zoo, he'll go to the penguins and he'll sit there and listen to me read the thing about penguins. So when he's interested, then he takes in the information."

After some on-line research, Rachel used this interest to develop another skill:

"Rachel – …with the penguins we did a paper cut out and you fold it into a penguin shape. I don't know if he still has it. But it actually made an upright penguin about this big, 3D."

"Megan – From paper?"

"Rachel – From paper and that was on pinterest. I thought, "Oh that is so cute, Caleb will love that, I'll print that one out." And he normally hates crafty things like drawing. He doesn't like colouring and he doesn't like cutting out paper but because it was a penguin he did that. He enjoyed it."

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25 Pinterest is a website used to share ideas for activities. Mandy described it this way: “It's a board. Everyone's got their own board. So, if you like something that you see on a blog or whatever, you pin it. It's like your own bookmarks list but its visual ... if you search in the search bar, 'kinesthetic literacy ideas' it will come up with a whole list of them or 'teenage mutant ninja turtles birthday cakes' or whatever and then you can go and just follow these people so, ... if they put up something else then it comes up on your page so you can see it. So you get all these ideas in one place ... it's fabulous.”
This was a massive accomplishment for Caleb that succeeded primarily because his mother had found something he loved and used it to teach him something else, to stretch him a little. Sharyn experienced similar successes with her ten-year-old son:

*Sharyn – Zack loves the Titanic, loves history, and while we've got a reading book on the Titanic which is way above his level, but he wants to read it 'cause he's interested in it, even though he will find it really, really hard. It's amazing when interest is there, how much of a difference it makes to that child and what they remember from it.*

*Megan – So, you've noticed that?*

*Sharyn – Oh, definitely, I mean, especially with him and his learning difficulties, to get his interest, you've got to have interest in the subject…*

Judi explains the concept of working with her children’s interests admirably:

…we had like a weekly plan for each child, and I would sit down with them and say, "OK, you're in the middle of this project and so, on Monday, why don't you work on that in the morning and then in the afternoon we're doing this and you've got dance lessons or we're getting together for drama or whatever," and we'd just pretty much agree together. Because I found that agreeing together meant higher motivation which was obviously in my best interest. I mean, why would you push water uphill forcing children to learn something they're not interested in, when they're so highly motivated to do what's sparking their interest at the time?

There were many more anecdotes offered throughout the interviews of parents using their children’s interests as a springboard for innovative and meaningful learning – parents love to take the spark of their child’s interest and facilitate it and fan it and see what happens. For example, one boy had made his own violin, two siblings were writing stories about friends who found a time machine and experienced exciting adventures as they travelled to significant events in human history and one nine-year-old girl writes her own computer programs. You could see the pride and joy these mothers had in their children’s achievements. Perhaps my favourite illustration
of homeschooled children experiencing wonderful learning as a result of following their passion is the one Jane shared about two brothers who roped their sisters and little brother into performing a play. Jane describes it here directly after talking about how, at school, she felt that children were pushed from one activity to another. She said:

*Jane – I'd rather find a point of interest that we were all interested in and go from there and do things like that together[,] and find what their skills are and work towards what they're dreams are.*

*Megan – So, with your children, did you notice that they learned well when they were doing something they had a passion for?*

*Jane – Yeah, yeah I do. Our older boys were really interested in film. At that time they made little movies that were amazing and they'd build this set in the garage they, Jeff and Jacob, they spent hours and hours making a cave. Like, they put up chicken wire and covered it with paper maché and put all this sand over it all. They sewed costumes, we didn't have a sewing machine, and they made all the costumes by hand. It was amazing.*

*Megan – The boys? Wow.*

*Jane – It was a good job. They got the girls, the younger girls, to act in it and Alex. Yeah. I think a lot more of their natural skills come out then and you see what their interests are and what they're good at.*

So, many home educators encourage and facilitate their children to follow their passions as part of their education. There is, however, a great divergence in the extent to which they apply this philosophy which essentially follows the continuum shown in Figure 2.

The two women at the far natural learning end of the spectrum, Kate and Gabriella, believed that their children should initiate every learning activity they do. Gabriella is entirely led by her sons’ likes and dislikes and Kate believed this to such a degree that she felt even suggesting a specific art project associated with their current topic of interest was contrived.
In stark contrast, Sharyn, whom I consider near the structured end of the spectrum, believed that parents should have the final say in decisions regarding their children’s education and when asked, “Who chooses what your children learn and the way that they learn it?” she quickly responded, “Well, I do.” Yet, when I arrived, I was met at the door by a very excited young boy with a very large grasshopper-like creature that had been his birthday present just a couple of days before. A conversation ensued about the last few days which had been centred on studying bugs in their backyard and included a trip to the library to collect more bug books. This had all stemmed from the long-term fascination with creepy crawlies of the 6-year-old birthday boy. Also, very shortly after owning the educational choices for her family, Sharyn went on to say: “Well, I guess I use them as a springboard. You know, they show interest in something and we go from there.” Elsewhere, however, Sharyn made clear that this approach is only taken with subjects other than mathematics and English for which she decides what must be learned (though we have seen that she chose a Titanic book for Zack because she knew it would encourage his reading). Sharyn has the final decision regarding what will be formally taught but she is mindful of her children’s strengths, weaknesses and interests and works hard to present information in a way that will motivate them to learn.

While Sharyn had quite a structured and parent-directed approach, Jacinta took this significantly further. We have seen that she believes her sons need to learn “everything,” not just what they like doing (pp.98,106). To her, ‘everything’ includes, not only mathematics and English but the sciences and the social sciences as well – she chooses all the academic material for her sons. However, Jacinta goes to great effort to facilitate their extracurricular interests. She has four sons, two of whom love drawing. She takes them to weekly drawing lessons, an hour’s drive away. She said, “Yes, I saw they enjoy doing it so I found the teacher here so I take them every Wednesday to do their art.” One of the other sons has recorder and tennis lessons and the youngest son attends a drama school weekly. They are also involved in a swimming club. She plainly does target and facilitate her children’s interests but this does not extend to their formal schooling.
Targeting weaknesses

Personalizing educational experiences did not always spring from a child’s interests. Sometimes, parents deliberately designed opportunities to extend their child or to help them overcome a perceived weakness. This was usually done by providing the learning opportunity then coming alongside them, step by step throughout the trial. Jenny felt that Jarrad needed to develop self-confidence in his academic abilities so she planned for him to sit the NAPLAN tests. She also reasoned that learning how to sit a test what a life skill which could help Jarrad later on. Two months before the tests they were, almost daily, doing sections of past tests so that Jarrad would be well-versed in what to do when the time came. Here is Jenny and Jarrad’s dialogue:

Jenny – I really want to do it because I want Jarrad to see that he is really smart. He's like, "Oh, no, I won't be any good at it," and all of that sort of thing but it's like, "You can do it and do it really, really well and—"

Jarrad – I just don't want to do it because it makes me nervous.

Jenny – I know it makes you nervous but you'll see how good you are. Once you've done it, and you'll go, "Wow, look at my score, I'm right out there on the top. Really I am clever. It's not just Mum saying that. Really I am clever…"

Larissa’s youngest son was in Year 10 at the time of the interview and had decided he would like to do Year 11 at a senior campus the following year. So, this year was all about getting Harry ‘up to speed’ to give him as good a chance of success as possible. English was identified as a particular subject needing work. Larissa bought the relevant Year 10 text books and Harry began to work through them but found that much of the work was at a harder level than he had anticipated. This is the counselling she offered him:

OK, big step up for him. Work, work, work. But well, you know, if you’re thinking about going to school next year, these are the prerequisites you’re going to need. He did get a bit stressed. And I said, "Look, it doesn’t matter. If you go the year after, we might even take another year, it doesn’t really matter. So, don’t get so stressed that you’re frozen. Just work on your skills and we’ll see where you are at the end of the year and we’ll make a decision then."
Larissa was able to encourage Harry to aim at getting ready for school the following year but was simultaneously able to offer him flexible deadlines so that excessive pressure was alleviated – she mapped out an alternative path should it be required. This also demonstrates a willingness to work within a child’s readiness.

Individualizing the learning experiences of a child is highly valued by these homeschooling parents. Most participants use their children’s interests or natural inclinations to enhance both motivation and educational outcomes, though this is applied more narrowly for those at the more structured end of the learning approaches spectrum. Personalizing education can involve the level of work chosen, the content of materials and the method of choice.

**Situated learning**

The learning through life which is made possible by homeschooling is highly prized by many home educating parents – when something of interest happens, families have the time and space to investigate and follow it where it leads. Parents value this because relevance and context is added to learning. This was not a theme I explored explicitly in the interviews, though most of my participants volunteered at least one example of ‘life’ being used as a trigger for learning. Several participants described many examples that could be categorized as situated learning. Judi and Jenny, in particular, were keen practitioners. Judi, for example, built her whole homeschooling routine around learning opportunities which presented themselves, “rabbit trails” as she called them. The following excerpt is just one of the stories she relayed:

*Judi – At certain ages your children potentially drive you nuts, because[,] “but why?” and “how?” and “what is?” And my daughter was about 6 at the time and I just had this realization one day, that I, the thought of her being in a classroom with all these questions in an environment where probably she would be told, “Not now,” or “We can’t,” was so painful to me, I wrote this piece and I described a morning where we’d been having our breakfast and on the radio was a program talking about the technology of hip replacement.*
Megan – And your children were sitting, listening to that?

Judi – Yes, we were sitting, having breakfast, listening to this. And I said to them, "You know your nanna, because she can't walk, she's in a wheelchair, she doesn't have her hips replaced, she has her shoulders replaced because she uses her arms." And so, then it was a trip to the computer to pull up what a shoulder replacement looks like, what the part looks like, what it's made of, how it's replaced and everything around it. And that was our morning. And that was so worthwhile, [...] So often it was this kind of rabbit trails that I didn't want to say that we can't do it. I mean, it's often enough that you actually have to say, "Well, we can't do that now." And I would try to scribble it down and make a note, "There's interest in this. We need to do this, [...]"

Megan – 'Cause there are lots of different directions.

Judi – Yeah, there are lots of different directions. But, following the question of the moment, I think is, if you've got the freedom to do that, it's a huge privilege.

It is clear that Judi treasured taking spontaneous learning journeys with her children. On some occasions she even deliberately went looking for learning situations embedded in real life. In this extract, Judi gives an inspirational example of using teachable moments:

Judi – We did our grammar through, do you know Lynne Truss's book, 'Eats, Shoots and Leaves'?

Megan – Yes.

Judi - We read 'Eats, Shoots and Leaves'. And we went out and did 'punctuation terrorism' basically.

Megan – Right.

Judi – We went around town and we went to shops and restaurants where they've got chalk boards and they've got apostrophes in the wrong place. And I'd say to the kids, "Go on, fix it up." And they'd go rub it out and put it in the right place. And stuff like that.
Sharyn, likewise, embraced situations which could be turned into learning opportunities. We have seen that the bug birthday present propagated learning opportunities. Here she describes several teachable moments her family experienced shortly before our interview:

Sharyn – …like last week we went to the Timber Park because Jay was doing his CALM certificate and he had to do some stuff on trees. So we thought, "We'll use it as a stepping stone for ourselves." We went down and we looked at the different types of trees. We looked at the different bark, that sort of stuff, the sap, coming from the tree. And we did some leaf, what do you call it?

Megan – Rubbings?

Sharyn – That's the word. We did some leaf rubbings…

Megan – So, you would say that you take advantage of things that come your way and sort of try to use those?

Sharyn – Yep, for sure. And in a homeschool environment, I believe there's a lot of stuff that you learn just from everyday life. You know, whether we do cooking of some sort… you don't even consider it to be schoolwork but you could technically say it was schoolwork.

Megan – ‘Cause they're learning?

Sharyn – Yeah, they're learning. Yeah it's just, even finding something in the yard and you go, "What's that? Oh, let's look it up." Or, "What kind of bug is that?"

For some families these opportunities came so frequently that they did not need to formally cover some learning areas. Both Jenny and Helen admitted that they actually didn’t timetable in science as a formal subject. Both suggested that they and their children had a natural interest in science and spent a lot of their spare time informally engaged with scientific concepts so there was no need to manufacture  

\[26\] CALM - Conservation And Land Management, a Western Australian government department.
learning opportunities in that area. Helen, when talking about some of the ‘free
range stuff’ they did says:

Science we do naturally. I'm naturally a science thinker and that's what I teach
at work so it-- we're just talking about science all the time. So I just have to
remember to write it down in the way that the moderator wants, but we cover
that no problems.

Jenny explained her method of covering science using almost exactly the same
language and then provided specific examples. She also shared that she has a
passion for history and, as described in this next passage, particularly loves to embed
history in contextual situations for her children. Eight-year-old Jarrad also
participates in this conversation:

Jenny – …we study history as in we will go, on the way back up from
somewhere, we will go into a museum on the way back from[,.] we spent 5
hours the other day we spent at the museum in, where was it? On the way back
from Albany. We were there for 5 hours being shown around. It was really good.

Megan – Mt Barker?

Jenny – Mt Barker, yes, yes.

Megan – Oh, that’s a lovely museum. It’s got the old wattle and daub buildings.
They’re just so old. Lovely.

Jenny – I know. <to Jarrad> You sat in the rocking chair didn’t you? The rocking
chair that the boy made in 1911. Didn’t you?

Jarrad – Oh, now I know what you’re talking about.

Jenny – Yes, yes. But you’re not supposed to sit in the chair but the old man
said, "You come and sit in here, I like children to actually be part of history. Sit
in the chair." This kid, this rocking chair was made by an 11 year old boy in 1911
or something like that. 9 year old?… it was this old leather covered rocking
recliner chair that you could sit down in and rock in it, which was pretty cool.
Jarrad – Yeah, I could lean back, it does it like a regular chair except when you
lean back it’s got the force to pull that up. So, you don’t have to pull a clip or
anything, you just lean back and now your legs will go up.

Jenny – It was a good bit of engineering by that boy and it was really good that
you could go to a museum and actually be part of it. So I’ve organized museum
trips for the homeschoolers to go on and things like that.

Jenny described many such experiences such as a study of refugees sparked by a TV
program and a library book by Anh Do, and a chance meeting with a backpacker
from Boston which evolved into research of the Boston Tea Party and its influence on
Australian history. Jenny had made a practice of taking whatever things life brought
her way and turning them into learning experiences. Some of these experiences
were purely opportunistic while others resulted from attentive searching.

Situated learning was practised by home educators right across the spectrum. Kate
and Gabriella are devoted to learning through life – it is the very definition of natural
learning, though they tended not to deliberately seek opportunities but let their
children stumble across topics which sparked their interest. This quote comes from
early in Kate’s interview:

…when they show an interest in something then we facilitate that by going to
the library or by going on the internet or exploring it or— At the moment my kids
are interested in catching frogs and today I’ve left them at home with their
friends and they’re in the dam and they’re catching frogs and doing sort of
experiments on these frogs. Not hurting them I hasten to add… And we have
lots of books around the house on things and we watch TV documentaries about
things and we write stories and make things up and, it’s all kind of covered in
our everyday life.

Gabriella neatly sums this up: “So, I think everything is a learning experience. In life,
in everything, they are learning.”

Anh Do is an Australian author, comedian and actor who fled Vietnam as a refugee.
Gabriella was one of several parents who were blessed to have travelled extensively with her family. Others had overseas relatives or friends with whom they frequently communicated. For homeschooled children, all these provided opportunities to practise writing and communication skills and to learn of other cultures, languages and peoples.

We have seen that those at the more structured end of the teaching styles spectrum also use situated learning frequently for their children – Jenny and Sharyn have been quoted many times in this section. Even Jacinta, who was completely school-like in her approach, extolled the benefits of contextual learning. Before moving to Australia, Jacinta had studied Ancient Egypt with her sons. Shortly after arriving, Jacinta discovered an Ancient Egyptian exhibition at the museum they then visited. She said this about the experience:

\[...when \text{they} \text{ saw } it \text{ they} \text{ understood where everything} \text{ falls in place}. \text{ So, it was actually good... so they [her sons] said, } "Yes, I can really see now where everything is coming from."\]

All participants positively viewed the opportunities home education offered their children to learn in context. The sources for situational learning specifically mentioned during interviews included museum exhibits, the Scitech\textsuperscript{28} Discovery Centre, television documentaries, visits to farms, correspondence with overseas relatives and friends, travelling, backyard discoveries, radio segments, computer programs and of course, books which were often obtained from libraries.

The use of the computer in home education should be specifically emphasized as its use, particularly now with the ubiquitous nature of the internet, has radically expanded the learning possibilities from home. Twelve of my thirteen interviewees specifically referred to computers as a resource they frequently use and even

\textsuperscript{28} Scitech - is a science discovery centre in Perth containing interactive scientific displays and a planetarium.
Elizabeth, whose children rarely used a computer, did keep up to date with homeschooling events via the internet. Besides facilitating organization of current events and resources, the internet gives universal access to expert information on anything and everything – it enables anyone to follow the most random and intricate ‘rabbit trails’ from their home at any time. This has profoundly empowered home educators to offer their children cogent learning experiences. This cannot be overstated. Jacinta is not a native English speaker and yet she could provide her children lessons in correct English grammar and spelling and even the chance to learn specific pronunciations. Judi, is not a surgeon or even remotely connected to a medical field, yet she provided her children intricate knowledge of a shoulder replacement. As they were already studying penguins, Rachel showed her son how to make an origami penguin to help him improve his dexterity without first having to spend hours experimenting with it. The potential examples are limitless. ‘Teachable moments’ can now be augmented with timely, detailed research to promote meaningful, memorable learning experiences right in our homes.

**Conversational learning**

One technique available to home educators which cannot be readily applied to traditional schooling is conversational learning. Parents can have in-depth, intricate conversations with their children and from this readily convey information, build on existing knowledge and ascertain just how much understanding has been gained. It is easy to do and can be done anywhere, however, it is sometimes maligned as a method as there is no measure of success and no documentation. This was implied by Helen in an earlier quote when she said, “…we’re just talking about science all the time. So I just have to remember to write it down in the way that the moderator wants…” – if she doesn’t write it down there will be no evidence for the moderator that learning has occurred. But Helen sees conversational learning as an important and legitimate teaching method. When asked what a normal school day looked like, she responded:
...We would start 9/9:30. Yeah, we'd be finished by lunch. Easy. But, you're always discussing, talking about things. So, as you know, learning doesn't necessarily happen at a desk... we've been talking about science at eleven o'clock at night because she's asked a question and you answer it.

Many of the quotes of the previous section demonstrate that conversational learning often accompanies situated learning. Listen to what Jenny says, when discussing their study of refugees and the Boston Tea Party:

...he came out from Vietnam. He was a migrant, boat person, basically. Um, there's a better word than that,[.] refugee. Yeah, 'The Littlest Refugee', it was called. And then we turned on the TV and there was a program about Anh Do and then we'd been talking about refugees from there. It's just, sort of, something comes up and then we'll follow it along on its way. We took a backpacker back to the train station the other day and that started a conversation about the Boston Tea Party because she came from Boston. You know, the Boston Tea Party and how that relates to Australia and how come, why Australia got started because America said, "No thanks, we're not taking any more convicts, thanks very much."

Judi offered me this lovely example:

...one of our units was local history and we needed to find an elderly person and go and interview them. So, we had a proxy grandmother, where we were living. And the children were only little but they thought of the questions that they wanted to ask her – “Was there electricity when you were a girl?” And she told us about the day that electricity came to her home and her parents' shop and was telling the kids all these things, you know. Very living history.

Jenny and Judi used in-depth conversation as opportunities arose. But conversational learning was just one method they used – it supplemented written and experiential learning. This was also the case for Helen who said, “sometimes we do the worksheets and sometimes we just talk about it or find something else to do with that.” However, conversational learning was the primary tool of some parents,
particularly those who leaned toward a natural learning approach. Gabriella, for instance, relied heavily on conveying information verbally to her sons. These two excerpts which demonstrate this reliance:

...depending on the books we read at night, they, we talk a lot about it. If it's a story, no, they usually listen. But if it's a book about the sun and the planets like that, they talk and they ask questions and so, I try to do that during the day as well.

And:

Gabriella – …I take every opportunity to talk about everything when we travel and they ask questions. So, it’s easy.

Megan – Do you travel a fair bit?

Gabriella – Yeah, we do. Yeah. We are going to the Philippines next month.

Megan – Nice.

Gabriella – Yeah. So we go on the plane, I say, "We are going here and we are going to the capital and the capital is this." And, you know, everything we do we talk about it. And they do ask questions as well.

Gabriella makes it clear that her teaching method of choice is reading books to her sons and talking about ‘everything’. Kate, also a natural learning advocate, likewise routinely uses conversational learning. She explains this in the first extract and then gives an example of how it works in the second:

Most of our learning is through conversations and it’s informal in that way. So we have lots of conversations about things. And I, their learning happens sort of as part of our life… [Everything apart from reading practice] is occurring through questions and conversations and when they show an interest in something then we facilitate that by going to the library or by going on the internet or exploring it…

I don’t say to them, "What would you like to learn about this week?" And they say, "Aw, I’m really interested in finding out about the vikings." It doesn’t
happen that way. It's more my son'll say, "Is it true that the vikings used to come into Scotland and when they went to the villages there they used to steal everybody's stuff?" And I'd say, "Yeah, that is true." And then we'll have a long conversation about it and he will ask questions and I would make statements and he would make statements and we drop it when he's had enough. That's it, it's the end. And then, it might be a week later or it might be a month later or it might be a year later, we'll revisit that again and it could be that he's seen something on TV that sparks his interest about it again or, and he's obviously been reflecting on it in the meantime in his own way and that's basically how our learning works for everything.

Rachel was also highly dependent on conversational learning for her son, however, this was not by choice – Caleb has profound learning difficulties and very limited ways in which he can actually absorb information. Here is some of what Rachel said to describe Caleb’s struggles:

'I've tried to stop using the threat of having him go back to school. For the first year it was a threat, I used that threat, "Oh, if you don't do homeschool then you'll have to go back to school." 'Cause it would make him do the bookwork but it just shuts him down so I've tried to stop using that threat.

And,

...as soon as we pull out a book he loses interest. So it's a case of, I talk about what I know about it and I've done the research…

So, what was the method Rachel used to teach her son? She researches all the material that Caleb should be learning, learns it herself and then disseminates that to him through discussion while they are doing practical activities. Here she gives an example of how it works:

...Which is why it needs to be something I've learnt myself and then I sneak that information into him. Um, we'd made pizza… and in an hour he'd learnt about Italy and it was rote facts about Italy and even now, a year later, he can still tell you those facts. If you ask him, "What's the capital of Italy?" he'd be able to tell
you. And that was over the course of an hour, once, while the pizza dough was rising and we were playing cards. So that’s the way I sneak the facts into his life. For some reason it sinks in when he’s not actually engaging with it and when it’s not on the page in front of him, it just seems to work.

The traditional approach to learning just doesn’t work for Caleb so Rachel has studied the way her son absorbs information and now specifically presents content in a way that is user-friendly for him.

Rachel’s methods do have drawbacks as they don’t lend themselves to all that ‘should’ be learned. But what ‘should’ be learned? Who ultimately decides what is right for a child to know? I will address the regulation concerns of Rachel and others in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

Amongst the parents I interviewed, home education was practised in a wide variety of ways. One parent was very school-like in her approach while others deviated from traditional methods by varying degrees – some participants had completely unschool-like methodologies. Regardless of specific practices, parents had each child’s best interests at heart. Fundamentally, this meant teaching them in a way that was nurturing, though to most, it involved much more than this - it meant individualizing learning experiences by ensuring that work was at an appropriate level and often of interest or relevance to the child. Investigating contextual information and imparting knowledge through conversation were practices readily available and highly valued by a significant proportion of participants. In Kate’s words:

…learning at home is different than learning at school in all the ways that we’ve talked about already, and that learning in a way that is flexible and informal and conversational and individualized and not deliberately taught is a very effective way for children to learn and I’m totally confident that my children are learning everything that they need to learn and that they have the opportunity to learn whatever interests them and that follows their interests
and overtime I think that they’re going to have a huge repertoire of knowledge of things that they can actually use in their lives, and that it's a sort of effortless process at home really, of learning and that they’re learning how to think and how to explore things and not just what to think…

On the basis of these understandings, I will explore parents’ perceptions of home education regulation, and specifically the mandate to adopt prescribed curriculum, in the following chapter.
6. Parent Responses to Homeschool Regulation

Introduction

The beliefs and aspirations of parents largely shape why they choose home education and the methods they use. Based on my personal experiences as a home education practitioner, I anticipated the extent to which a home educator used structure in their approach, would largely determine their attitude to the Australian Curriculum and their subsequent uptake of it. I assumed that those families who adopted a highly structured, school-like approach, could use the Outline with few modifications to their current practices. Conversely, I reasoned that those families using more unstructured, natural learning methods, would likely struggle to find an ‘easy fit’ with the newly regulated curriculum. As Elizabeth said, she would “have to become more schoolish.” Since each family’s approach is potentially pertinent to their compliance with regulation, the teaching method spectrum from Chapter 5 will again be an important point of reference.

The degree to which participants used a natural or structured approach to learning

I also make reference throughout this chapter to the “Moderators’ Letter” (Appendix B) which I have explained in Chapter 2 (pp.51-52). I obtained this letter headed “Transitioning to the Australian Curriculum: Guidelines for Home Education 2014” from my homeschooling friend, Sharyn, during my practice interview. District-specific versions of this letter were sent to all home educators at the start of 2014. Most participants had received it, with their moderator as signatory, although a couple had not read it prior to being interviewed.
In this chapter, I have collated my participants into groups with similar reactions to the newly introduced regulation. I will briefly consider the responses of each participant separately within these groups. I precede this discussion by considering parents’ views on accountability to the State and complete it with an exposition of some of the considerations deliberated by parents when formulating a response to their moderator’s demands.

**Accountability**

Most participants did imply that they were accountable to the State (and hence their moderator) for the education of their children – a fact supported by their voluntary registration to homeschool. Larissa was the exception as she had only registered after “someone dobbed me in.” It should be noted, however, that even though registration was considered reasonable by most, it was often associated with a measure of anxiety. For example, Rachel said, “You’re always a bit worried before you meet your moderator – are they going to be the kind of person who’s on board with what you want to do…?” This will be discussed further in the last section of this chapter (pp.153-158). I noted also that a willingness to register did not indicate the intent to submit to every directive decreed by authorities. Indeed, it will become apparent that some parents had no intention of doing anything with which they did not agree.

**“What does all this mean?”**

Both Gabriella and Jacinta had been homeschooling for some years though for different reasons, both had not been registered to homeschool in Western Australia for long. Both these participants spoke English as their second language.

**Gabriella**

When Gabriella first responded to my blog on a natural learning website, she had not yet registered to homeschool even though she had been homeschooling for four years. We scheduled an interview for a month’s time, on her return from an
oversea trip. In that month, Gabriella was contacted by a government department
to explain a cut in her family payment – she was required to start looking for work.
On explaining her situation, Gabriella was directed to formally register to homeschool
to retain her regular payment. She did and underwent her initial moderator meeting
just before our interview. Consequently, when we spoke, Gabriella had not had
much opportunity to digest the requirements of registration and what it would mean
for her. After inquiring if I knew many natural learners who were registered Gabriella responded:

Gabriella – Yeah, if I had known about this I would have, I don’t know, thought
about, yeah, something else. Because, I don’t know if it’s going to be too hard.
I could see when I talked to [the moderator] I was like, "Oo, this is not what I
thought." And I did, I tried to ask her, "Can I unregister and pretend this never
happened?"

Megan – Did you say that?

Gabriella – I didn’t say it with the exact words because I don’t think that’s
possible once you’re in the system. That’s it, right? There is no turning back? I
don’t know. I don’t agree with the way they’re–

Megan – What is it in particular that is going to be hard for you?

Gabriella – Following the curriculum. Doing things that I don’t think are
necessary, that I think are a waste of time. Learning about history, geography
and all these things is good. I love history. I love geography. But if they are not
interested I can’t show it to them. You know, I can read, like we do it all the
time. I read books to them. Sometimes they say, "This is boring," and, oh, OK,
we drop it. “I’m not going to be reading to you if you’re not enjoying it because
it’s not going in then.”

Megan – What about the maths and English. Do you think it’s fair enough to
have, like, "You need to know these skills"?

Gabriella – Yes, you do. I don’t agree with the methods they use.
Gabriella was willing to read books about any subject to her sons (as long as they were reasonably interested) and in this respect she was prepared to follow a set curriculum. However, with regards to teaching skills such as reading and writing, she was not prepared to push them. She had not realized that registration would require this level of accountability. Gabriella’s moderator focused on the need to show progress, but as almost all their work was done orally, lack of written work proved problematic. Gabriella’s moderator had consequently suggested several writing activities to resolve this deficiency. Gabriella’s responded: “So, I will keep encouraging him but I’m not going to push him.” This disparity left Gabriella concerned about the potential for future problems:

…I don’t know what will happen to us, you know. I’m going to try to, I mean, if the department is going to get a lot more stricter than it’s been then that’s not going to be good for us, for me, because, no, what can they do then? They can’t force you to send the kids to school or anything like that.

At the end of the interview, Gabriella again expressed concern regarding her moderator’s expectations and revealed a number of strategies she was considering to resolve the situation. Principally, these tactics involved methods of deception. While this in itself was not unusual (this is discussed further in the final section of this chapter pp.155-156) the lengths of deception she described were beyond that which I had heard before or since.

At this early stage, Gabriella was content to use the curriculum as a guide for knowledge (although she could not guarantee she would cover it all) but appears committed to using methods which would likely put her at odds with her moderator.

**Jacinta**

Jacinta holds opposing beliefs to Gabriella – she views bookwork as essential and is comfortable placing educational demands on her sons. However, like Gabriella, she was confused about the implications the Outline would have on her family. At the time of our interview she had been in Australia for just over one year and her English
was such that I am not sure that we fully understood one another. From a telephone conversation, I knew she was using texts she had imported from America but I didn’t know any details so, I asked:

*Megan* – *You said you were doing a curriculum from America?*

*Jacinta* – *Ah yes. I use 'Love to Learn'. It's a Charlotte Mason philosophy.*

*Megan* – *Oh, yes.*

*Jacinta* – *And it’s ah, living books. So, from the youngest child ‘til the eldest child you can do at the same subject. It's just the bigger kids do more like a paragraphing…*

As a home educator, I had some knowledge of the Charlotte Mason philosophy – it is a gentle ideal which starts with a child and their environment and seeks to teach and nurture them in a manner compatible with who they are.

Later we discussed the Australian Curriculum. She had looked at the related website shortly after arriving in Australia “to make sure everything is covered with my kids needs and stuff” but had found the website “halfly done” and not particularly useful. Her response to the Moderators’ Letter (Appendix B) explaining the Outline was: “Well, I know I cover everything, so I don't worry actually about it.” She justified her lack of concern further:

*Yah, well I guess, I can do it. I will do it if they ask me to do it. But I’ve noticed that the levels, the standard levels is not very high compared to what I’m used to because the work they [her children] are doing is very hard…*

Jacinta’s reaction indicates intent to comply with regulation but I perceived that she really didn’t understand what this entailed. She later asked:

*Jacinta* – *Will they, the Australian Curriculum people, will they have a problem if we as homeschoolers do other curriculums or what?*

*Megan* – *Well, I can't really say. If you read the letter, it says that some people might have to alter what they're doing. What does it say? <reading> "Some home educators may need to add to or adjust their programs"*

*Jacinta* – *Ah, OK, I see that here. And what will they do if you don't do that?*
Evidently, there were some uncertainties which gave Jacinta concern. I chanced to meet her at a homeschool conference several months later and was informed that she was not changing from the ‘Love to Learn’ curriculum but gave no indication as to how she had come to that decision.

“I like having some curricula guidance”

While some parents knew very little about the Outline and how they would assimilate it into their homes, others had spent time researching its requirements. Four of my participants had done this and appreciated the direction it gave them.

Mary

In January 2013, Mary was picking up Austin’s education after removing him from school and then using a bought curriculum package, so she had never overtly evaluated his curricula needs before. She had no idea where to look but wanted something comparable to what Austin’s peers were learning, so she conducted an internet search. This is how she described the process:

*I didn’t know I had to follow the Australian Curriculum last year when I went and found it. I was trying to work out what I should do, and it was like, it’s Australian and it’s curriculum. So I was basically looking for what I was supposed to do at school and that seemed like a good plan to me. I’m in Australia, it’s educational and that was just what I stumbled on.*

She “stumbled on” the Australian Curriculum website and used it to determine what science to teach her son. Several months later, Mary moved away from that to an on-line course, which she felt was more suitable. She also used the Australian Curriculum for history and continued using it as she found a compatible text book.

Mary did, however, have concerns about mathematics for Austin, who struggles with the subject, and desired to complete its requirements as soon as possible:

*Megan – So, that’s one of the motivations for doing maths at the moment? – it’s just to–*

*Mary – To finish.*
She did, however, put a positive spin on the compulsory nature of the experience:

*Ah, the curriculum says he has to do maths to a certain amount and[,.] quite honestly, it's good for him to learn stuff. I just sort of said to him, "You know, sometimes it will be good. At one point you might find that you want this." So, at the moment we're still pursuing the maths.*

Overall, Mary understood the need for Austin to learn a range of subjects and liked having a definite curriculum she could use, but she also desired the flexibility to deviate from that if she discovered something more suitable (as she had for science) – she had deliberately moved away from set curriculum in the past to achieve this.

**Rachel**

Rachel was quite knowledgeable about the Outline. Like Mary, she also liked having a syllabus to guide her choice of content – it made her look beyond Caleb’s usual interests. She elaborates this here:

*Rachel – We did some Aboriginal studies and he learnt how the Aborigina[l]s built their summer houses, their little tepees, and he made his own little miniature version and so I took photographs of that, so it shows the learning he’s had even though it wasn’t book learning.*

*Megan – And did you choose that activity because it was in the curriculum and you picked it out?*

*Rachel – Yeah, that's how I handle the curriculum. I look at what's in the curriculum and then I find a way that we can specifically target that and there's a section in the curriculum that requires Aboriginal studies so we've, I've deliberately selected Aboriginal outings and excursions that we can do to engage in that area of learning without him realizing that we're marking off the curriculum. That's actually how I do it. I have the curriculum printed out and I go, "This is what we need to learn" and I find a way for him to learn it and then I check it off, "Yes, we've done that."*
Megan – And if you didn’t have that, what would you do, how would you choose things to study?

Rachel – Well, it would be entirely based on things that he’s interested in then. Which I, it’s one of the reasons I actually like having the curriculum, because it gives me an idea of what children his age are expected to know so I can target it. For example, there’s a whole section on first explorers which we haven’t covered yet...

Overall, Rachel was positive about the Outline, however, she did have one serious complaint – the volume of bookwork required. As discussed previously (pp. 88,128-129), Rachel’s son, Caleb, had significant learning difficulties which resulted in a complete aversion to bookwork – she says, “it just shuts him down.” So she has developed innovative ways of helping him learn information. Consequently, there wasn’t always a lot to show for his learning, causing her moderator some concern. She explains:

Rachel – …at the moment I’m having to learn everything before he learns it so that I can teach him.

Megan – So, you use his interests as a springboard for the topics that you do and the activities that you do?

Rachel – Yeah, which makes it hard when there’s things he’s supposed to learn because of the curriculum that aren’t really fitting into any of his interests. Like, one of the things the moderator brought up with me in February was that we need to show him the maths language. Like when we’re making a cake and we’re measuring half a cup we need to show him that half looks like that and you add half and a quarter together to get[,] so you actually make it written on the page and I get frustrated because I was terrible at maths to begin with and I’ve never used it in life. I don’t– the written maths on the page, I’ve never come across a sum that I’ve needed to be able to work out.

Megan – But you read it in a recipe book, half a cup of whatever.
Rachel – Well, you read half a cup but you don’t have to add your cups together because you’ve got half a cup of this and half a cup of that, you never have half a cup plus half a cup to put in, and if you did, you’d just put half a cup and half a cup, you wouldn’t even need a full cup.

Megan – But if you’re doubling the recipe maybe that might be something practical.

Rachel – I’d just do it twice.

Megan – Yeah, OK. Fair enough… So, can he recognize what a half is if it’s written on the page?

Rachel – Yeah, he can recognize it, he can read a recipe because we read recipes but he probably– at this stage he couldn’t do the math to make it for 40 people and so that’s one of the things she brought up and said, “Look, you need to teach him so he can do the math on the page even though you’re not doing it in real life. Take the real life experience and put it down on paper.” And that’s frustrating because he doesn’t like anything on paper.

So Rachel, like Mary, felt it was important to cover a broad curriculum, however, she found it difficult to link some of the topics to contexts relevant to Caleb and, like Gabriella, lack of written work was a significant point of contention during her moderator’s visits.

Jenny

Jenny also appreciated having a comparison between her son’s learning and those of children of similar age but was more concerned with the level of work rather than the content. For example, she said, “I had no idea exactly what his peers were learning because I wanted to make sure that he was keeping up with his peers and preferably above them.” In addition, she felt this accountability should be limited to mathematics and English as she favoured choosing content of other subjects based on its relevance for Jarrad. On five separate occasions during our interview, Jenny expressed this opinion. One of these was:
I knew I definitely wanted to cover learning the three times tables for example. Just, sort of the basics. I don’t do 'Australia’s involvement with Asia in regards to something or other’. I don’t know. It’s just not relevant for us. So, I sort of did the basics as he needs to know [...] grammar and so forth, things like that.

Also, like Mary and Rachel, having a defined curriculum was appreciated when she was initially commencing homeschooling:

*Megan – How familiar are you with the Australian Curriculum?*

*Jenny – Yeah, fairly familiar. I looked at it quite well last year and the year before to try to work out exactly what he needs to do.*

*Megan – And, what prompted you to do that?*

*Jenny – Oh, the thought, "Well, what do I teach?" When I first started I thought, "Well, what do I teach?" So, I looked at the curriculum and thought, "Oh, well, that’s what you’re supposed to know."

So, Jenny did appreciate having curricula guidance for literacy and numeracy but sought personal choice for those subjects she considered non-core.

**Helen**

Helen was another participant with mixed views of the Outline. She had a natural learning background but was now looking to give her daughter more structure. This coincided with the introduction of the Outline so she was content, in theory, to adopt it. Helen believed the Outline to be detailed enough to give her direction but flexible enough to allow inclusion of her daughter’s interests. She liked that it gave her a contingency plan for those days when preparation was difficult. Helen had been detailing on-line mathematics, spelling and art courses which 9-year-old Amy uses and then said:

*And everything else is hit and miss. We’re using more books this year. So we go with the RIC publications. So, I’ve just gone and bought all the RIC publications for the year and, we don’t go page by page but I use that as a trigger. So sometimes we do the worksheets and sometimes we just talk about it or find something else to do with that.*
And:

Megan – So the books you've chosen are specifically Australian Curriculum ones?

Helen – Yep. I want to reduce the work load for me. So if I just want to grab a book and have a look at it, that's what I do.

Megan – Ok. That's easy.

Helen – Yeah. So we still do mostly, aw, probably half-and-half free range stuff and books but the option's there if I want to. I can even just look at the headings to get an indication of what it is that I'm supposed to be covering.

Overall, Helen thinks the new curriculum is workable and easy to follow, however, she says several times that she feels it is narrowing home educators options and that she would rather have the broad range of choices which used to exist. She explains: “…my concern with it, if they continue down this path, is that it would narrow us down, down, down to the point where we don't have a lot of flexibility…” This is the opposite of Rachel’s impression that the new curriculum broadened the scope of content she taught. Like Rachel, however, Helen sometimes struggles to find the relevance of the prescribed content to her child’s world:

I'm treating it as extra at the moment because I can't[,] because we don't watch the news, we don't watch a lot of, you know, we don't watch advertising TV sort of channels, so, I don't know how to link it in because Europe means nothing to us now because it's not in our world. So I'm treating it as sort of separate at the moment because there is no natural link in with what we are doing that I've found. Maybe I need to be more creative – look at where our spaghetti's come from or something.

Each of Mary, Rachel, Jenny and Helen found the Outline workable and useful as a starting point or backup, though each expressed their preference for the freedom to personalize some areas of the curriculum, mainly in the sciences and social sciences. In addition, Rachel’s moderator determined that the predominantly oral and experiential methods Rachel used with Caleb were insufficient.
“Let me teach so that they'll learn”

Uncertainty & fear

Jacinta and Gabriella were not the only homeschooling mothers who expressed uncertainty and anxiety regarding the transition to the Outline. Helen had run an information session about the Australian Curriculum for parents in her local area. This is how she explained it to me:

Megan – Sandy mentioned that you'd looked a lot into the Australian Curriculum. What was the trigger for that? Did you receive a letter or[,] you just knew it was coming?

Helen – Partly, ah, there was lots of[,] fear basically from the homeschool mums.

Megan – About moderator meetings or the letter?

Helen – No, just from, I don’t know where they found out about it 'cause I didn't know it was coming in until I heard from other people. At every meeting or at every coffee shop or every other homeschool mum I met there was so much fear with this new curriculum and they were scared of change and I was just sick of the conversation… see I basically just got really annoyed that people were fearful of this new curriculum. I ended up having, or calling a meeting to people to say, "Hey, anyone who wants to, let's have a talk about it." And we, I had a presentation about it in one of the halls and showed them Scootle29, showed them how to log in, who to email and they all came away thinking, "Oh, is that all we have to do? That's easy." It’s[,] they've just changed a few words and changed a few things and there's a bit more difference but yeah, there was this huge fear factor of change…

As discussed in Chapter 3 (p.74) I also experienced this uncertainty and fear when I was trying to recruit interviewees.

29 Scootle is a database of digital resources mapped to the content points of the Australian Curriculum
Mandy, Jane, Larissa and Sharyn all expressed a degree of uncertainty, concern and even fear of how their families would be affected by the changes in homeschool regulation. For example, Jane admitted: “it’s a bit scary for me” and Larissa said:

Yeah, so I don’t know. I just don’t know how this is going to work. And I don’t know how it’s going to work for families generally[,] and I think a lot of homeschoolers have done extremely well doing their own thing.

Larissa also made these comments in reference to the related website:

Larissa – …I went, "Oo::: This is as clear as mud."

Megan – So, you’re not actually sure what they’re telling you to do?

Larissa – No, other than, we have to fit the mould or else.

As well as being genuinely anxious about the incoming changes, each of the four women discussed in this section had at least one child with learning difficulties – children whose academic achievements would not compare favourably to those of their peers. These children often needed non-traditional approaches to learning and often required prolonged exposure to tasks to develop the same level of competency as other children.

Mandy

Mandy has two such children. Below is a contribution to a petition against changes in the NSW homeschool regulation written by Mandy in August 2012:

I have recently had to bring my boys home from school. We homeschooled and then we didn’t and now we do again. School didn’t suit them. One withdrew and I didn’t see him smile for almost a year. The other was lashing out physically to myself and to the teachers and other kids at school. This last term, my Year 2 son spent less than two hours out of 4 weeks, in class and joining in. Since bringing him home, he has done LOADS of learning. If you change the rules, my son will be overwhelmed at home as well. I am happy to make sure he follows the curriculum and improves his knowledge, but please don’t tell me how to do it. School didn’t work for my boys and my daughter is thriving there. All kids are different. Let me teach so that they’ll learn.
“Let me teach so that they’ll learn.” For Mandy, the prospect of being boxed into a rigid timeframe was the most frightening effect of the regulation changes. I asked her specifically about this. Her response was lengthy including many specific issues she has with her different children’s reading and writing – I have chosen to overlook these in order to establish her broad reaction:

Megan – On your petition you said something like, “I don’t mind doing the curriculum but don’t tell me how to do it.” Something like that. So, content isn’t an issue, it’s the way it’s presented, is it?

Mandy – I understand that they have to learn certain things… there are some things that are important but when I’ve got a kid who does not want to learn about[,] whatever, and I have to do it, I hate that. I hate it… I don’t like that they’re telling me exactly what to do and exactly when… It just doesn’t make sense. And, I’m happy to teach them how to read and write, sure, but if they’re not capable of doing it, why would I force them to do it?

Shortly after this, I asked, “So, homeschooling has really been a lifeline sort of, for you?” Mandy replied, “Absolutely. Without it, I don’t know where my boys would be…” Being able to teach her children at home in child-specific ways had transformed her family, and Mandy felt this was being threatened by the need to use the Australian Curriculum (of which she said, “It’s very limiting” and “this one is hard ball”). Her simple request was, “Let me teach so that they’ll learn.”

**Accelerated Christian Education (ACE)**

Jane, Larissa and Sharyn each expressed similar views to Mandy but also had other factors in common. Broadly speaking, they had remarkably similar home education experiences – they each struggled with reading difficulties amongst their children and had previously used a bought curriculum called ACE then moved away from it. ACE is very workbook-based, very prescribed. All had unequivocally disliked the experience and had ceased using it in preference of more individualized learning activities for their children. Sharyn said:
I know with Southlands\textsuperscript{30} it was easier but to be honest, I lost sight of why we were homeschooling in the first place. Even though it was Christian curriculum, being ACE, I, we ended up just hating it. I hated it. The kids hated it. We all went, "What are we doing?" you know.

Sharyn found the ACE curriculum particularly difficult for Zack, who has dyslexia, as he was continually hampered by its reading-based style.

Larissa’s experience was identical – she had tried ACE but found it unsuitable for her daughter with learning difficulties and her son just hated it:

\begin{quote}
We tried it [ACE] with Bella but it was hopeless. It was one of those things I tried with her but, in the end, why it's so phonics-based it was just hopeless for her. I think if a kid is OK, it's a good start but we had another go, we had a try at it and Harry hated it with a passion. So, anyway, so we're back to the moderator this year. So we get the letter, all about the curriculum, the Australian Curriculum and how you've got to meet the dadadadada and[,] I just went, "Ooh, how am I going to do that?"
\end{quote}

Jane stopped short of saying that she hated the ACE experience but said:

\begin{quote}
And the three boys were doing it but it was hard[,.] And Alex has had a lot of reading difficulties, a lot of reading problems, so he wasn't doing really well with it, so we took the young ones out and Bess stayed on.
\end{quote}

All three of these women had deliberately moved away from prescribed curriculum because it did not cater for the specific needs of their non-standard children and now the introduction of the Outline was threatening to force them back into a workbook-based learning style which they so desperately wanted to avoid – it was turning education into schooling.

\textsuperscript{30} Southlands is a school which distributes the ACE curriculum.
Larissa

In the last few years, Larissa has been through a horrible divorce, is subsequently in financial difficulty and is battling with her youngest child’s learning difficulties. None of her older children are independent as yet. She is stretched. In this context, it is no wonder she makes these comments:

*Megan* – …if they did have a comprehensive list of this, this, this and they’re saying, "That’s what you must do." How would you go about that?

*Larissa* – How would I go about it? Well, it would depend entirely on how cranky I was feeling. <both laugh> Well, it depends entirely on my emotional resources and how, you know, space I’ve got to fight them and if I think it was worth fighting. Or I could just cave in and do it, which is what I’ve done with Harry – I just went to the bookshop, I went, "Right, I need something with the Australian Curriculum on it."

Lacking time and emotional reserves and not really understanding what was being asked of her, Larissa just found it easier to buy and use books which she knew were Australian Curriculum compliant. Some of Larissa’s concerns were alleviated by her moderator who recognized that Bella did have learning difficulties:

*Larissa* – Yes, and keeping in mind, I have no reserves to have an argument with my moderator this year. I have no reserves at all for that. So[,] and Bella, because of her reading problem she’s on an I E P anyway.

*Megan* – I don’t know what that is.

*Larissa* – An Individual Education Program. So, it doesn’t, she’s sort of a lot more flexible and exempt.

*Megan* – So that, sorry, does that need to get approved by someone? How do you get exempt?

*Larissa* – Well, by talking with your moderator, I presume. That’s how I’ve done it. ’Cause I said to her, "Look, how does this work with Bella, and, you know, there’s no way she can do Year 8 text analysis of English and stuff. I mean, she really, really just can’t do that at this point in time." And she said, "Oh, that’s
fine, you just put her on where she is, it doesn’t matter where you go back in the grades, if that’s the skill that she’s at, just mark there and she’s on an IEP anyway so we don’t have to overload her with a second language and you know, all this other stuff."

Larissa did not want to use prescribed curriculum – she had tried it before and did not want to use it again. However, because of her circumstances, the only way she could comply with regulation was to ‘cave in’ – she had to start with the Curriculum and apply it to her son rather than look at Harry’s needs and find curriculum to fit. Fortunately, her biggest concern was alleviated – at the moderator’s discretion she was granted considerable concessions for her daughter with learning difficulties.

**Sharyn**

Larissa was not the only home educator facing the introduction of the Outline at a difficult time. Sharyn also had many challenges. At the time of the interview, she had a 12 week old baby, a toddler, three homeschooled children, was finishing house renovations and trying to organize work experience for her eldest son. It is not surprising then, that Sharyn made this comment:

*That’s what sort of scares me about the new one coming in because I think, "I don’t know it. I don’t have time to study what I have to be doing." And having 5 children and a baby it just seems[,] I said to Geoff, "Oh I’ve got to spend some time researching this to see what’s going to change."

To buy herself time, Sharyn bought some Australian Curriculum-compliant workbooks. This, however, was not the sort of education she wanted for her children:

*So, we’ll see how it goes, but doing three different topics for three different grade levels of children that are struggling with basic reading, is going to be a huge issue, that’s why I thought that workbooks, if I bought them that already cover it, I don’t have to think about it because, having the baby and everything, it’s very hard to plan for three different levels. It’s easier to do like a unit study where they all do it and you just tailor it to their different needs. But three different ones, it just, to be honest, we’d change everything.*
Sharyn explained further:

Yeah, it will be very simple fill-in-the-blank type stuff which is really the schooling that we wanted to get away from, which makes it very sad, I think.

Maybe we should move to America where there’s none of these sort of laws and you can teach them what you believe that they should be learning.

Sharyn would rather be doing unit studies with all her children together than the workbook approach the new curriculum was funnelling her into. She thought maybe that, at a later stage when pressures had eased a little, she could use the workbooks as a springboard for other things but she predicted this could also have problems:

Sharyn – “OK, this is what we are supposed to be doing. Alright, let’s see what books we’ve got. Let’s go to the Library,” but then we probably wouldn’t cover the content with how much we want to with that sort of leeway of being able to go off on a tangent because that will obviously take longer than if you just stick to doing the workbook.

Megan – ‘Cause you’d still be covering content but not the content?

Sharyn – Probably not all of it. ‘Cause that’s how I like to teach now, it is I guess, getting away from a fill-in-the-blanks type mentality…

Sharyn wanted to provide deep learning experiences for her children but was unable to do this in her present circumstances and cover everything the Outline dictated – she could not follow the ‘tangents’ which were meaningful to her children. Again, children were being required to fit the curriculum rather than moulding curriculum to fit students’ needs. Sharyn did have a good rapport with her moderator but had not been offered the flexibilities handed to Larissa. I will share more of Sharyn’s insights with respect to her moderator at the end of this chapter.

Jane

Jane, like Sharyn, Larissa and Mandy, wanted very much to move away from workbook-style curriculum but was under duress with her workload at home and the reading difficulties of two of her three homeschooled children. She also had decided
to surrender to her moderator’s wishes and buy Australian Curriculum workbooks even though she felt this was not in her children’s best interest. Here is what she said when I asked if she had seen the Australian Curriculum website:

  Jane – I was just– it’s a bit scary for me because I think,[.] Like, we bought a lot of the Australian Curriculum books.

  Megan – Just recently?

  Jane – Yeah. All the ones that I could find, all the Australian Curriculum subjects that I could find. Yeah, like my moderator said that, like it says in that letter that, if you don’t do Australian Curriculum books that you have to show how what you’re doing relates back to the Curriculum.

  Megan – Yes, it does say something like that. “…You may decide to continue using the material if you can demonstrate that it covers—”

  Jane – Yeah, my moderator’s quite strict. Like she’s got this sort of reporting thing for me to do each month that I have to,[.]

  Megan – Sorry, what does she—?

  Jane – Like, a reporting thing of what we’re doing and how it relates to the Curriculum and what competencies and,[.] yeah. And I think, like, she sort of suggested that we do Australian Curriculum books otherwise we’re going to have to do a lot of work to relate everything back that you want to do to the Curriculum. Like, that’s good ‘cause I didn’t,[.] I couldn’t find the Australian Curriculum on-line when I had a look so, yeah. But I mean, she’s going to inform me more during the year but to me it’s a bit scary and makes me want to go back to ACE.

Having bought the compliant workbooks, Jane had found that her two sons with reading problems were struggling – mathematics seemed to be fine but anything that was reading-intensive proved challenging. The workbooks were simply not meeting their needs. Jane explains what she would rather be doing:
Megan – So, if you had your choice, what would you be doing with Alex? If you didn't have to comply with various regulations?

Jane – I think I would just concentrate on the practical things of English that he really needs in everyday life and maths as well.

Mandy, Jane, Larissa and Sharyn were concerned that the Outline had forced them into a style of home education which just did not suit their families. They had all taken deliberate steps away from workbook-based resources because their children did not respond well to them, but now felt obliged to change back. Rachel and Gabriella also took issue with the amount of bookwork associated with the Outline. None of these parents felt this was producing better educational outcomes, although four of them had reluctantly yielded to these demands. Jane, in particular, appeared troubled – she portrayed sadness, helplessness and guilt at various stages of the interview. It was obvious that she wanted to help her children gain the basic skills they need in a way that suited them but was unable to do so while shackled with an uncompromising system and a moderator who enforced it.

“I’d just leave the country”

Judi

Judi had homeschooled her two youngest children for fifteen years. They are now adults pursuing further education but she has an ongoing interest in home education as she lives with her three grandchildren who are likely to be homeschooled in the near future. As she was reading through the Moderators’ Letter (Appendix B) she gave four different responses. Firstly she declared, “I’d just leave the country.” Next she offered, “Makes me want to cry, honestly” and “this is ridiculous.” Finally, “Yeah, I’d march with a placard.”

Judi felt the change in regulation was primarily prompted by a complete lack of understanding of the existing schooling system and the nature of home education. Here are several extracts to validate this:
I don't even want[,] this is ridiculous. <holding the Moderators’ Letter> <Sigh and long pause>. They have such a deep ignorance. It's mindboggling what they don't understand – how we best learn and how desperately damaging all this testing is. I don't understand how they can be this[,] dumb.

Furthermore:

…I really don't have much respect for any of this because I don't think, I think the biggest deal is, in a way, the people who produce this are presiding over a deeply flawed, broken system, that's producing a poor result… But they put this out there as if they've got a system that's brilliant, that's working so well and producing such great results and it isn't. I mean, I've had friends, teachers, who've come back from national teachers' conventions and one of the workshops is 'When the system breaks', 'When the system folds'. Not if.

In my view, Judi was an incredibly innovative and self-confident educator. She gave numerous examples of wonderful learning opportunities she had instigated and had spent significant time studying educational methods and learning theories in order to teach her children well. Judi believed that covering topics of interest and following them through to a natural conclusion provided the best learning outcomes – she advocated project-based, contextual learning rather than a bits-and-pieces-of-individual-subjects approach. This is the sort of unit study which Sharyn expressed a preference for. In discussions prior to and since the interview, Judi has expressed the fear that, with this rigid structure, her grandchildren will not have access to learning experiences like those she gave her own children.

“It’s just not relevant”

As we have seen earlier, Jenny chose to ignore some of the Outline on the basis that, “It’s just not relevant for us.” Elizabeth and Kate both took this further and felt that the entire Outline had no reference to what they were trying to do with their children’s education.
Kate

About the Australian Curriculum, Kate said:

Kate – I haven’t looked into it in a huge amount of detail. The first year I started I read the syllabus and the curriculum and I just found it so, [...] horrible.

Because, [...]

Megan – Is this the Australian Curriculum?

Kate – Mmm. Yeah, … I’m not really that interested in learning any more about what they want me to teach my children and what they consider to be necessary subject areas to cover in my children’s education. And I’m happy to, like, dress up what we do should I need to in order to satisfy their requirements but I’m not going to, yeah, there’s not going to be any changes in the way that we’re learning at home and I’m not going to, I don’t care what the content is really of the curriculum. Not because I’m– simply because I don’t think it’s really relevant to our life… My kids are naturally curious, they love learning and they love exploring things and they will be more than well equipped to be able to learn whatever they want or need to learn in their life. I’m a hundred percent confident of that. And I just don’t think it’s relevant.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth assumes a similar approach. She has been homeschooling for many years, so she also dealt with the transition to the Curriculum Framework when it was introduced. The story of her response to the introduction of both curricula is very lengthy so I have reduced it significantly while trying to preserve the essence of the message she conveys:

…I didn’t know there was an Australian Curriculum until last year. I didn’t even know that it was coming. Because when the Curriculum Framework was coming I had a huge problem with our moderator at the time because I said I hadn’t looked into it at all… she was a new moderator and really gung-ho about getting everybody to do it the school kind of way. And it was the first year I’d met her and she said, "And what are you doing about implementing the
Curriculum Framework?... So I said, "Well, I'm probably not going to." I said, "I'm happy with what we're doing and I'm not really going to change anything anyway, so I'm fine."...So, I never did look at it. And with the Australian Curriculum, I actually haven't looked at that either, but,[.] [the moderator], yeah, she's quite happy to look at what we do and slot it in usually, if she needs to because I usually write her up just an A4 page for each child with the different learning areas and what they might have done…

Shortly afterwards, Elizabeth explains her reasoning:

Elizabeth – I don’t know how they can say that we have to change and do something different when for the last, whatever it is, fourteen years we've been doing what we thought was appropriate and all the kids have learned and every year we've had our registration re,[.] whatever they call it.

Megan – You've been reregistered?

Elizabeth – We've been reregistered every year. So, there hasn't been an issue, so how can they suddenly say, "You're not doing this, you're not following the Australian Curriculum so you're in trouble." And I'll say, "Well what about all the rest of the years."

Neither Kate nor Elizabeth had researched the details of the new compulsory curriculum. Both were very confident they were completely meeting their children’s educational needs and that anything else was simply not relevant to them. Kate was prepared to document activities in a way that made sense to her moderator if it was needed, however Elizabeth placed the onus on her moderator to match up what she did with what she was required to do.

The moderator

It was clear that different moderators were interpreting and enforcing the Outline in different ways and that this did affect parents’ responses to it. This is worthy of explicit exploration as the moderator is the face of regulation for a home educator – if they satisfy the moderator, they satisfy the regulation. Consequently, a
moderator’s interpretation of regulation has a direct impact on the accountability parents are required to demonstrate. Helen conveys this when she says, “You still need to justify to the moderator at the end of the day, that you’ve done your job.” In addition, moderators appear to have a great deal of discretionary powers to exempt (or not) home educators from some aspects of regulation.

A number of interviewees did question what a moderator could actually do if they were not satisfied by the education being offered. We have already seen that Gabriella said, “…because, no, what can they do then, you know? They can’t force you to send the kids to school or anything like that” and that Jacinta asked, “And what will they do if you don’t do that?”

Rachel had moments of similar thought:

Well, that’s one of the things I’ve wondered about. If I don’t please the moderator, I have a legal right to teach— to choose how my child is educated, so while you have to be registered, surely if they turn around and say, “You’re not registered,” what are they, what can they do? Can they also force me to send him to school where I know that he also wasn’t learning?

The mere existence of variations in how each moderator interpreted both regulation and their role was a cause for anxiety amongst home educators. I have already cited Rachel as saying, “You’re always a bit worried before you meet your moderator – are they going to be the kind of person who’s on board with what you want to do…?”

Sharyn made a similar comment: “…each individual moderator that comes here has a different way that they think it should be done and that dictates what you do.”

Sharyn also mentioned, in a later conversation, that she got on very well with her current moderator but there was always the uncertainty of, “What if we get a different moderator because ours gets sick or changes job?”

An example of diversity in moderator expectations occurred in my interview with Mary and Jane. There were two moderators spoken of. Mary describes her moderator as, “very much old school” and “very practical and he sees the value in
things... But he's not rules-oriented which is also, it's good, in a good way.” It was also said of him: “Really, I think he doesn’t care much about the Curriculum.” Whereas Jane said that her moderator was “very strict” and that she “suggested that we do Australian Curriculum books otherwise we’re going to have to do a lot of work to relate everything back…”

Jane, however, believed that different methods, content and foci would better serve her sons. The only alternative that she could see was to change back to ACE which she had also found quite unsuitable. Rachel, likewise, undertook some activities which she thought were counterproductive to her son’s education, just to satisfy the moderator. She said: “So when we do bookwork it’s almost exclusively because the moderator needs to see something. And he [her son] knows that. That’s the only reason he’ll do it.” But this “would make him do the bookwork but it just shuts him down…” So, some parents did yield to moderator demands even though they didn’t want to.

Generally, all of my participants, except perhaps Elizabeth, largely did try to mollify their moderator. However, woven throughout the interviews is the understanding that parents didn’t always present the facts as they really are – many references were made to ‘being creative’ with their documentation with the express purpose of keeping the moderator happy. These ranged from relatively insipid acts such as Helen’s example below, to systemic deception as demonstrated by Kate (following Helen’s excerpt):

Helen – Science we do naturally. I’m naturally a science thinker and that’s what I teach at work so it, we’re just talking about science all the time, so I just have to remember to write it down in the way that the moderator wants but we cover that no problems.

Kate – So, in Perth what I used to do, I find documentation quite tricky because, [.] I just have too many other things to do. And in Perth, my moderator needed more structured information about what learning opportunities my kids were getting and what those outcomes were within those areas and she wanted me
to provide documentary evidence of three changes for each child in each of the learning areas for the curriculum, so I used to translate what we were doing into words which made sense to her so that she was able to tick those boxes.

And then referring to a possible change of moderator, Kate finishes with:

…I would dress up what we do in a way so that he could tick it or she could tick the boxes. I’m not going to make trouble with anybody. I don’t want to be some sort of revolutionary about this. I’m not interested in causing any sort of controversy about it so if that’s what I have to do, that’s what I’ll do. But it will be contrived and fake. Really, I shouldn’t say that actually. It, it’s just that[,] if that’s what I have to do then that’s what I’ll do. But I would hope that my moderator would understand that learning at home is different to learning at school…

And that’s the point – learning at home is different to learning at school. I will expand on this statement further in the concluding chapter.

So far in this section we have witnessed a variety of approaches by moderators and a variety of responses to moderator demands. But we should also note that these are not fixed entities and that perceptions are subject to change with time and circumstance. Judi describes one such change:

I had a lovely moderator who was honest enough to say, “Well, I’ve been on this journey. And when I started as a home ed moderator, I really thought I was the police. I was going out there to make sure these fruity, nutty people weren’t damaging their kids.

And home educators can change, too, as Sharyn shares below. This excerpt is lengthy but I have quoted it in its entirety as it provides insight into sentiments to which many parents alluded regarding their sometimes conflicting duties to their children and the State and the role played by the moderator. Keep in mind that Sharyn was struggling – trying to balance what she thought was best for her children with her difficult circumstances and the demands of regulation. Some of the comments are quite personal and are based on our sixteen years of friendship.
Sharyn – I guess, with the moderator side of things you tend to – I don’t know. For me, personally, it becomes too much of a thing that I think about. Rather than thinking, “What’s the best for my children,” I tend to think, “What’s the moderator going to think?” rather than, “What’s the best for each child?”

Megan – Hmmm.

Sharyn – And I know that’s not right.

Megan – I think you’re doing really well by each of your children.

Sharyn – Well, it’s still, ‘cause I’m the type of person who wants to do the right thing, you know. And I know by the Lord, we’re supposed to do what the law requires and so knowing that, I think, well, “What does He require of us?” because, it’s not always what’s in writing, you know, or what is required by law. But each individual moderator that comes here has a different way that they think it should be done and that dictates what you do. And so, if I had that moderator down in [another district], we’d be like, “Wow,” casual like, teach my children how I think I should be teaching and I know she’d be fully behind it. But nearly everybody else has got to dot your I’s and cross your T’s. You know how you’ve been doing this and that and you feel like you’ve got to document more, I guess, rather than just enjoy it. You know, you just know you’re doing the right thing by your children.

Megan – That’s interesting how you said that you want to be doing it the way you think you should be doing it but you have to modify what you think you should be doing.

Sharyn – Yep, I mean, I struggle with that big time because I know ultimately, I’m answerable to God and God wants me to do things a certain way – we’re teaching them what’s going to benefit them more than what the system does. But, I know it’s a bit of a balance because I know we have to do the right thing by the authorities. They’re not asking me to do anything illegal you know, or then God could say, “Well actually you shouldn’t follow them.” We’re supposed
to do what the law tells you to do. So, you try to do it to the best of your ability but it’s a battle in my mind if,[.] Where is that line?

Megan – And you’re more aware of it as the moderator thing gets closer and afterwards, not so much?

Sharyn – Yeah, well, that’s the thing. If you show, “This is the way we do it” documentation up to that point, well then I can feel like I can go, “OK, we can school the way we want to school until next time.” You know, and we just, I mean, as long as you’re doing the right thing. I think that’s the number one thing. There is times where you think, we need to do more, we need to do more, we need to do more because, you know, there’s things that happen – we’ve had renovations in the house, we’ve had the baby, plus I’ve been in hospital quite a few times last year, so you end up going, “Oh man, how are we going to fit all this in?” You know, and you just do what you can. You’re trying to cook and do things healthy. And then I think, "You should go out for a walk." Yeah, right. <Laughs.>

Sharyn touches on several key issues. Firstly, deciding on a final balance between moderator demands and personal convictions can be an incredibly complicated and conflicting process. Secondly, even if a home educator does modify their practices to suit a moderator’s approach, this can be a fleeting aberration – normal practice could be quite different from what the moderator actually sees. This duality can be justified on the basis that, “you just know you’re doing the right thing by your children” but again, can be associated with significant anxiety.

**Conclusion**

There was a wide range of responses to the mandated use of the Outline by the Western Australian home educators I interviewed. Some parents had yet to formulate a thoughtful response, others were familiar with it and had developed an approach, yet others had no intention of ever becoming accustomed with its content. Of the two parents who were newly acquainted with the Outline, one already had a
culture of bookwork and felt its uptake would require little adjustment. The second was not as confident of successfully adopting the Outline as fundamental aspects of her natural learning approach were being challenged by her moderator.

Eight participants were familiar with the Outline, four of whom responded in a predominantly positive manner while four were primarily unhappy with the changes. Of the first four, each overtly expressed favourable aspects of the Curriculum but did have some concerns they were working through. I was surprised to realize that these women were widely dispersed across the learning-style continuum. Of the remaining four, each articulated fundamental problems they had with the Outline but each was, nonetheless, outwardly conforming to its demands – three of them were using Australian Curriculum-specific books as they felt unable to comply any other way at this stage. Again, these women represented a wide range of learning approaches.

It is significant to observe, that all of the four women who were reasonably content with the use of the Outline, educated only one child at home. All of the other nine women homeschooled multiple children. I believe this is a crucial factor in their response. Each of the four women was dedicated to the individualized delivery of learning experiences to their one child and found they could generally achieve this within the structure of the Outline. However, once there was more than one child to consider, parents who tried to work within the bounds of the Curriculum found it difficult to meet their children’s varied educational needs to the extent they wanted to. The only way parents of multiple children felt they could use the Outline was to employ a school-like approach which was, in all but one case, contrary to their beliefs and desires. Parents felt they were being forced to choose between ‘caving in’ to regulation and doing the best by their children. It is reasonable to conclude then that many homeschooling families find the rigid nature of the Australian Curriculum in opposition to their conceptions of learning and that this effect is magnified if consideration must be given to the needs of more than one child.
The final two participants had deliberately chosen to maintain their current learning philosophies without reference to the Outline. Both were confident they were succeeding in meeting their children’s educational needs using alternate methods and that these would stand up to scrutiny should they be challenged.

Finally, it became obvious that there was substantial inconsistency in moderator expectations. The mere fact that there was no standard measure of moderation produced anxiety amongst home educators. Overall, greatest apprehension seemed to occur amongst home educators with multiple homeschooled children whose moderators held to a rigid application of the Curriculum. This was intensified if a child had learning difficulties which prevented them from thriving in a structured environment, particularly if there were other underlying family considerations. Generally, home educators did want to please their moderator but were prepared to resort to deception if they believed it to be in the best interest of their children.
7. Discussion of Findings

Throughout this project I have adopted a qualitative approach using a three-phased framework proposed by Kögler (2008). The first stage described by Kögler involved ‘coming clean’ about my own experiences and assumptions. I accomplished this in Chapter 1 by briefly outlining my fifteen years of homeschooling experience and my underlying beliefs which evolved over that time. Phase two of Kögler’s method necessitated the gathering of contextual accounts from other home educators. I subsequently interviewed thirteen Western Australian home educators, ten of whom had been registered under both the old and new regulatory systems. Two parents were newly registered and one had now ceased homeschooling but had an ongoing interest through her grandchildren’s education. In Chapters 5 and 6, I examined these responses to gain insight into why and how these participants practised homeschooling, their attitudes to regulation changes and the practicalities of how they intended to meet these new obligations.

There now remains only the third phase of Kögler’s proposed stages to complete – to place my beliefs and experiences alongside the findings obtained from my interviews to construct a synthesized understanding of Western Australian home educators’ perceptions of the Australian Curriculum and regulation mandating its use. I begin by summarizing my participants’ insights into home education and its regulation, drawing on my relevant experiences and applicable literature outlined in Chapter 2. Through the lens of these insights, I intensify my focus on homeschool regulation in the context of the broader Western Australian education system – this again, is informed by pertinent literature. Consistent with the understandings established throughout this chapter, I conclude by offering suggestions for alternative moderation of home education in Western Australia.
Homeschooling in Western Australia

International law

Parents have both a right and a responsibility to do well by their children. Together, the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights 1948*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966* and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1999* safeguard a child’s right to an education and confirm that parents are entitled to choose a type of education compatible with their family (Varnham & Squelch, 2008). For many parents, this involves sending their children to a school but, for an estimated 2% of Western Australian school-aged children, parents exercise this right and fulfil this responsibility by undertaking homeschooling.

It must be acknowledged at this point, that partaking in an education is quite a different concept to receiving schooling. Certainly, there is some degree of overlap, however there is a “hidden curriculum” inherent in the aims of schooling which is quite different to the goals of education (Giroux, 1983). International law enshrines a child’s right to education, not to schooling. It is paramount that parents who undertake homeschooling should be accountable for providing an education not a schooling experience for their children.

Who homeschools and why

Anecdotal evidence suggests the recent surge in homeschooling numbers includes many children who began schooling in a classroom only to find this undesirable or even untenable. This has been my observation as a long-term home educator and was certainly characteristic of those I interviewed. Of the thirteen mothers I questioned, all but one had put their eldest child into school with no intention of ever homeschooling them. Whether the decision to homeschool was made due to social issues (such as bullying) or academic concerns, these parents viewed homeschooling as something of a lifeline.

Generally speaking, my participants believed the purpose of education was twofold – education should equip a child, using methods that complement their character, with specific skills and knowledge for *their* future and ultimately, a child should be both
willing and able to learn throughout their whole life. Every parent I interviewed undertook homeschooling believing that, for that particular child at that particular time, these goals could best be achieved through homeschooling. This is reinforced by five of my interviewees who, at some time, had homeschooled some of their children at the same time as enrolling others in school. To these parents, the decision to homeschool depended upon the continuing benefits for each child.

**What learning takes place**

In determining what children should learn, participants with pre-teens indicated a common focus on the acquisition of basic abilities such as reading, communication and calculation skills. All parents agreed that there were core skills and knowledge that every child should learn although, except for the priority placed on reading, there was no general consensus of specifics. All but one participant believed that any gaps could and would be easily dealt with as they emerged. Complementing this, participants generally emphasized depth of learning over curriculum coverage. This position is supported by Ken Danforth, executive director of a learning center for homeschooled teenagers:

> Most kids who go to school don’t learn everything that is offered, or retain it... Schooling is no protection against learning gaps. What we want are people who know what they know and are honest about what they don’t know; people who are willing and able to learn things they need for the next step. The home-schoolers I know aim to be strong in their passions and deal with their ‘gaps’ as needed. Sort of like adults! (2006, p.33)

As children matured, parental focus appeared to change. Parents, in partnership with their child, developed a probable career path for which they then provided targeted academic learning opportunities complemented by relevant real-life experiences. This frequently involved engaging external course providers or community services. The levels of time, research and strategy devoted to formulating these specific career/learning paths demonstrate that parents are fully invested in the process of successfully transitioning their child to post-school life.
Regardless of a child’s age, parents highly valued the freedom to make choices specific to their children. All but one participant sought to use children’s strengths and interests as triggers for learning. Often they would deliberately provide environments rich in diverse potential learning experiences and would facilitate and further resource learning ventures once interest was shown. A number of participants reported achieving positive outcomes in areas their child traditionally found challenging when they had provided motivation through targeted interests. This is consistent with the findings by Hidi, a neuroscientist quoted in Chapter 2, who determined that interest is central to motivation, children with learning problems can achieve success by tapping into their interests and “utilizing interest in educational settings should be a major focus of educators” (Hidi, 2006, p.77). It is evident, then, that the freedom to choose content specific to a child is a valuable asset in the provision of high quality learning opportunities.

**How learning takes place**

Freedom of method was also highly valued amongst my participants. Of those I interviewed, a wide range of teaching and learning styles were practised. One of my parents, Jacinta, was completely school-like in her approach while two were completely unstructured. The remainder was spread between these two extremes with some inclination toward natural learning approaches.

Aside from Jacinta, all parents employed some oral techniques in working with their children. This was particularly valued by families with children who struggled with reading or writing. This was also my experience as my eldest son had poor dexterity linked to his cerebral palsy. As deduced in Chapter 2 (pp.21-23), learning through conversation and associated oral strategies is highly recommended in current educational research because large quantities of material can be covered easily, formative feedback can be given liberally, deeper understanding can be provoked and children are engaged in learning and included in the construction of knowledge. In Chapter 5 (pp.125-128) I found that such oral practices are regularly used in home education.
Again, all participants except Jacinta provided examples of situated learning, that is, learning in context, learning through participation. Some parents were particularly gifted in manufacturing learning opportunities from life experiences. Appointments, travelling experiences, television programs, visiting friends, libraries, shops and museums, even the chance discovery of a backyard bug or plant, could be used as catalysts for developing knowledge, communication and research skills. As a home educator, I was slow to realize the powerful educational potential afforded by ‘teachable moments’ but as I became more receptive to ‘interruptions’ I realized how common such opportunities actually were in the normal course of life and how effortless learning could be when children were engaged in the development of concepts they found interesting. Again, the literature indicates that current research both supports and encourages the use of this style of learning (see pp.23-24).

Ultimately home educating parents do what they do the way they do it in order to provide a personalized education for each homeschooled child. All interviewees but Jacinta indicated their desire and intention to provide an education tailor-made for each child. Some parents specifically mentioned achieving this through choice of method, others through choice of content, most through both. This autonomy was particularly cherished when children struggled with traditional schooling approaches. Five of my participants had previously made use of ready-made curricula. They all expressed distaste for the rigidity of these programs and had purposefully moved away from them having found them far inferior to what they could provide through more individualized means.

In Chapter 2 (pp.17-20) I detailed notable research confirming that individualizing education is an efficient and effective form of education. As learning occurs, opportunities can be adjusted to remain relevant and of appropriate difficulty; time and resources can be provided for concepts to be mastered; and needless repetition can be avoided. The preference for personalized instruction is further validated by society’s trend to hire private tutors when students are struggling in school – individualized learning opportunities often work when mass instruction doesn’t.
A brief look at trends in western nations suggests that personalized education affords better outcomes than the common prescriptive systems. Recognizing the continuing poor results achieved by their national-curriculum-driven system, the English system has moved towards more learner-centred approaches in the last decade. Finland began this move in 1968 and, since the inception of PISA testing, has been recognized as having one of the best achieving, highest equity school systems in the world.

In Australia, Geoff Masters, CEO of ACER (Australian Council of Educational Research) confirmed that our nation is also likely to follow this trend when he stated, “I do think we’re going to move in the direction of more personalized learning where students are working at their own pace – where we’re not just failing them because they’re behind other students of the same age. If we’re failing them at all it will be because they’re not making progress in their learning” (O’Loghlin, 2013). Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are already becoming more commonplace in Australian classrooms, particularly for atypical students. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Training and School Leadership, 2014) a document which outlines “what teachers should know and be able to do” explicitly obliges teachers to pay personal attention to each student’s needs. For example, a proficient teacher must “…implement teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students…” (Standard 1.3); “Set explicit, challenging and achievable learning goals for all students” (Standard 3.1) and “Provide timely, effective and appropriate feedback to students about their achievement relative to their learning goals” (Standard 5.2). These are all facets of individualized instruction.

Outcomes
There is no perfect form of education and home education, like all learning alternatives, does not have a one hundred percent success rate. However, both research and an abundance of testimonies confirm that the vast majority of homeschooled children, even those who would traditionally be expected to struggle, tend to perform well academically, some extraordinarily so. Since homeschooling as we know it has been practised in Australia for well over three decades (and before
that for two centuries) it is safe to conclude that these successes are not just transient phenomena. Almost all of my participants exhibited evidence of high quality practices (as informed by current research and successful international trends) suggesting that high rates of effective learning amongst homeschooled students prevail. The question is, will recent regulation changes facilitate or inhibit continued use of these proven practices?

**Regulation concerns**

Based on my understanding of the priorities and practices of the homeschooling parents I interviewed and of the correspondence they have received relating to regulation (Appendices A&B), I have two concerns: that home educators are being denied some legitimate, high-quality methods and that restrictions in choice of content will unduly hinder parents’ efforts to personalize learning opportunities.

First, as explained in Chapter 2 (p.52) letters to home educators specifically identified that some home educators may need to “add to and adjust their programs to ensure they meet the requirements of the Outline.” This was stated specifically in reference to “approaches and philosophies” implying that there are some methods currently used by home educators which will no longer be accepted. As this statement was left unclarified, I can only speculate on specifics, though moderator feedback to some participants indicates a push toward more written work, more school-like methods. If this is so, this is quite unacceptable. As stated previously, homeschooling parents are responsible for their children’s education, not for schooling them. Conversational learning and personalized instruction are proven, powerful methods of teaching which researchers and educationalists alike are unreservedly encouraging teachers to utilize more. Parents must be permitted to use these tools as an essential part of their homeschooling program as they see fit.

Second, it also appears that only content detailed in the Outline will be recognized as legitimate (see p.52). There is a basic set of skills and knowledge that all children of every constituency must learn in order to be productive, fulfilled adults. Just what
this is, is yet to be resolved but prescribing a detailed syllabus of skills and content for all subjects for all years K – 10, goes well above whatever these essential learnings are. To thrive in life, must every adult be equipped to “define congruence of plane shapes using transformations” and “extend and apply the distributive law to the expansion of algebraic expressions” (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014b)? Yet this is what is being mandated for every Year 8 student in Australia. Yes, there are skills of logic and process that can be learned through these concepts but are they essential for everyone? If a child has a fair to middling mathematical ability it may be reasonable to impose this grand academia upon them, particularly if they show an interest in a mathematically related field. However, if a student is particularly gifted in music or fine arts or carpentry or languages or gardening or any number of other useful pursuits, must they be forced to endure such mathematical rigour? (I say this as a qualified mathematics teacher who has a passion for geometry and algebra). If, at a later date, an adult does need to learn a specific mathematical concept, the ubiquitous nature of the internet now allows such information to be found and mastered in ten minutes or less.

**Parent responses to regulation changes**

**Lack of consultation**

Homeschooling parents were informed in a letter of their obligation to begin implementing the Outline. There was no consultation, no collaboration, just “do this.” They were largely left to muddle through an incomplete website, riddled with professional-speak, until their first moderation meeting when their obligations were spelled out more specifically. It is little wonder that many parents were uncertain about what was actually expected of them and were anxious about moderation. I interviewed thirteen parents a year after that first directive. A significant portion of those parents were still working out their full response to the regulation changes but at the time of interviewing, there appeared to be three broad reactions ranging from measured acceptance (‘I will do it and’) to reluctant acceptance (‘I will do it but’) to dismissal (‘I will do my own thing’). I will briefly elaborate on these next.
I will do it and...
Of those I interviewed, no-one adopted the Outline wholesale believing it to be a “one-stop shop” for their children’s education. There were four women who used the new curriculum as a guideline and then supplemented and modified it. The intended adjustments differed among each of the women but generally fitted within the interpretations of their own moderators, though there were some differences of opinion. It is significant that each of these participants had a good working relationship with their moderator and importantly, homeschooled only one child.

I will do it but...
The four parents with this response appeared particularly unhappy with the change in regulation. Each of these women had a moderator who enforced a relatively strict adherence to the Outline. These women had deliberately moved away from workbook-style lessons previously, finding them to be resoundingly unsuccessful, but now felt pressured to return to these school-like methods. The Australian Curriculum, then, seems to be turning education into schooling. These parents expressed a desire to focus on more experiential learning or project-based work but felt obliged to yield to their moderators’ demands. Hence, they were reluctantly compliant, displaying frustration at what they perceived were unnecessary constraints, anger at the lack of understanding shown and guilt because they felt powerless to help their children as they wanted. Mandy pleaded, “Let me teach so that they’ll learn” and Sharyn suggested moving to America where, “you can teach them what you believe that they should be learning.” These families were characterized by multiple homeschooled children with at least one child exhibiting learning difficulties.

I will do my own thing
Two of my interviewees were unapologetically determined to continue doing what they were already doing, the way they were already doing it. Both had deliberately avoided any in-depth look at the Australian Curriculum and had no intention of using it as a reference for their children’s education. They were both completely confident
that they were giving their children the best possible education. These two women had moderators who appeared accepting of this stance though significantly, one participant indicated she would doctor paperwork if this was needed.

‘Creative’ bookwork
This last point is significant. A thread which wove its way through most of the interviews was the willingness of parents to present a superficial façade to their moderator which may not accurately represent the style or content of the actual homeschooling experiences they were offering their children. This included parents from all three response groups and covered the breadth of approaches.

In June 2014, a well-known home education support group in Perth conducted a forum to help parents know how to comply with the Australian Curriculum and ‘pass’ moderation. There was a wealth of information presented about the legal standing of homeschooling parents and details of the Outline but the principal message of the meeting was “be creative with how you document what you do.” At one point attendees shared various methods of ‘creativity’ they could use. These ranged from presenting the moderator with hundreds of hours of audio recordings as documentation to borrowing other children’s bookwork. Afterall, with reasonable time constraints, how accurately can one moderator assess a year’s work, particularly if there are multiple children? Another proposal was that parents claim to use the approved Montessori or Steiner Curricula as there is little likelihood of moderators being familiar with those. The list of suggestions was quite staggering, with some being far more ‘creative’ than others. It appeared that every parent there believed that some, if not all, of these methods were quite acceptable given the inflexibility of the Outline and the impact that compliance would have on their children. The final words of the meeting were, “Do what you want – you are the parent. Tick the boxes. Be creative.”

I suspect that the attendees of this meeting were not a representative sample of home educators – these were probably parents who had already experienced some
moderation difficulties. Nonetheless, the distinct ‘us and them’ position held by these parents is noteworthy, perhaps reflecting the tone of Education Department directives to date.

The crucial role of the moderator

A second common theme which resonated throughout the forum was the discrepancy in expectations amongst moderators. Each moderator seemed to have their own understanding of the necessary level of accountability, the evidence required to achieve this and their own particular emphases in specific subjects. For instance, some time was spent discussing the requirements of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) given to various people by their moderator. For one person this involved eating a different international meal once a week, for another the formal study of one language was expected. In this meeting, as in the interviews, it was evident there was no standardized measure used by moderators to determine homeschooling success. Moderators, assisted by ambiguously worded regulation correspondence are afforded a huge degree of flexibility in what they choose to ignore, what they enforce and what evidence they require. Some moderators are insisting on strict adherence to the Outline. In Year 8, for example, this necessitates satisfying 92 separate content descriptors in addition to providing an overview of the Byzantine, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Viking, Ottoman, Khmer, Mongol, Aztec and Inca civilizations and the Yuan and Ming dynasties. And this is just for the four subjects which are currently available in the Outline!

Of all my participants I feel that Jane was impacted most by her moderator’s construction of regulation requirements. At the time of our interview, Jane was homeschooling her three youngest sons, two with reading difficulties. She is an experienced educator, having homeschooled all of her eight older children at some time, transitioning them all successfully to life after ‘school’. When starting out, Jane had used a highly prescriptive curriculum but had found that project work, focusing on topics of interest, was far more productive for her family. She strongly objected
to the rigidity of the Outline, however, being a woman of faith, she felt unable to falsify documentation. She wanted to concentrate on helping her two struggling sons to improve their literacy and numeracy but was instructed by her moderator that she must cover the whole curriculum. The mass-produced, age-graded, Outline-linked workbooks were proving far too difficult for these two boys but she felt incapable of producing her own materials to meet the legalistic standard of curricula cross-referencing demanded by her moderator. Moreover, for some reason Jane’s moderator was insisting on monthly documentation in addition to an annual visit. So much time, energy, resources and emotion was being wasted on peripheral subjects and book-keeping. This kind of homeschooling was not what she had signed up for – she wanted to help her sons but felt her hands were tied.

Some home education moderators, in contrast, seem content to employ a much looser understanding of the Outline. Localized respite from enforcement of stringent regulation is not a recent phenomenon. In 1903, Dewey (pp.196/7) wrote this:

Superintendents and principals often encourage individuality and thoughtfulness in the invention and adoption of methods of teaching; and they wink at departures from the printed manual of study. It remains true, however, that this great advance is personal and informal. It depends upon the wisdom and tact of the individual supervisory official; he may withdraw his concession at any moment; or it may be ruthlessly thrown aside by his successor who has formed a high ideal of "system".

Jane’s moderator had a particularly “high ideal of the ‘system’.”

This dependence on a supervisor’s goodwill is indicative of that expressed by many of the home educators I interviewed. Even if they had an ‘understanding’ with their current moderator, they were never quite sure if they would have the same moderator, and hence the same degree of accountability, for the next annual visit. This was a source of anxiety amongst home educators.
Some moderators were lenient with regards to regulation, others enforced it vigorously. Without having any specific data, from my participants’ descriptions and from my personal experience with a half dozen home education moderators, it appears that older employees, who have often been moderating for many years, were quite relaxed about the level and style of accountability required. They had seen many homeschooled children successfully and happily mature as their parents worked to offer them appropriate educational opportunities. This was certainly the case for Mary’s moderator of whom it was said, “He’s old school. He’s very encouraging”; “Really, I think he doesn’t care much about the Curriculum” and “I think he’s very practical and he sees the value in things…”

Moderators appointed more recently, however, seem much more likely to tightly enforce bureaucratic demands. There are two likely explanations for this observation – first, that new moderators have had little or no exposure to home education prior to their appointment and second, that new appointments are made based on candidates’ familiarity with schooling procedures. First, in June 2014 I spoke to a long-time home education moderator who believed she had yet to meet any moderator who had any first-hand experience of homeschooling prior to taking up a moderator’s position. Second, in unsuccessfully applying for a home education moderator position in 2014, I was informed I did not secure an interview principally because I did not sufficiently demonstrate knowledge of the application of the Australian Curriculum to home education contexts. I was magnanimously told that my homeschool experience was not held against me; rather that it was quite irrelevant. If successful candidates are teachers with a thorough knowledge of the Outline and with little or no understanding of homeschooling, it is little wonder that recently appointed moderators would naively attempt to apply classroom teaching principles to homeschool settings.
Prescribed curriculum

What research reveals

The guiding principles underlying the introduction of the Outline are intended to “promote equity and excellence in Western Australian schools” (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014c). Despite this, the Australian Curriculum, on which the Outline is based, has been described as promoting fragmented, decontextualized curriculum coverage over meaningful learning and likely to widen rather than narrow existing educational gaps (Atweh & Singh, 2011; Brennan, 2011; Ditchburn, 2012a; Ditchburn, 2012b; Drummond, 2012; Ewing, 2012; Yates & Collins, 2010). The Australian Curriculum is in its early stages of implementation so there is no empirical evidence yet to objectively measure its performance. However, as discussed in Chapter 2 (pp.31-33), there is a great deal of research and many experienced educationalists who surmise that neither equity nor excellence can be achieved through the comprehensive prescription of curriculum. On the contrary, Britain’s national education authority declared:

There is a clear moral and educational case for pursuing this approach [individualized learning]. A system that responds to individual pupils, by creating an educational path that takes account of their needs, interests and aspirations, will not only generate excellence, it will also make a strong contribution to equity and social justice (United Kingdom. Department for Education and Skills, 2004, p.6, emphasis mine).

Concurrently, there is a dearth of research to substantiate any claims that a superior education system must be exemplified by mandatory, fixed content or that greater equality results from such confines. The Finnish system, for instance, testifies to the fact that student-centred systems, backed by adequate resourcing, can produce outstanding results across the board. Likewise, the widely recognized success of home education, despite its apparent over-representation of at-risk students, provides compelling evidence to support the proliferation of more malleable learning systems. It would appear then that Western Australian educational authorities should aim to make classrooms more like homeschoools, not the other way around.
As Holt (1981, p.347) postulates:

What I am trying to say, in short, is that our chief educational problem is not to find a way to make homes more like schools. If anything, it is to make schools less like schools.\(^3\)

This is, in fact, exactly what happens when things go wrong.

Making schools less like schools

As described previously in this chapter (p.166) all Australian teachers are compelled to cater for the learning needs of each individual in their class. However, there are many students who fail repeatedly and disengage from learning. Dean Ashenden, a well-respected former consultant to Australian educational authorities, at both state and federal levels, confirms:

Failure is now endemic and, for too many, unrelieved. Most kids know by about Year 3 whether they are cutting it or not. Their teachers usually know earlier than that. The universal opportunity to succeed is also the universal opportunity to fail. The dirty secret is that where there are ladders, there are snakes also (2009, para.24).

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority has now instituted a detailed, year-by-year delineation of content to be taught, together with a list of authorized methods which may be used. Bi-annual national testing based on this fixed syllabus is also compulsory for schools. All indications are that these impositions in conjunction with the intrinsic characteristics of classroom teaching (such as class sizes and time constraints) will only exacerbate failure rates. State education departments acknowledge this lack of universal success by providing a range of initiatives for disengaged and failing students. One Victorian research group has compiled a list of over 900 ‘flexible learning programs’ currently operating in Australia (Te Riele, 2014). Amongst other features, these are characterized by personalized curriculum, a strong level of staff support and direct involvement of

\(^3\) Original emphasis.
parents and relevant community members. Learning is typically based on “curriculum that is purposeful, relevant, enjoyable and individualized” and is often project-based (Te Riele, 2014, para.17). These student-centred approaches, employed as ‘Plan B’ when standardized systems aren’t working, effectively make schools less like schools.

Alternative programs are not limited to Australia nor are they of recent origin. “Nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and America offer many examples of community-based, voluntary endeavours to generate educational alternatives…many aimed to create relevant and less prescriptive education in poor communities.” (Milbourne, 2009, p.74). Like Te Riele’s Australian research, Milbourne found that successful alternative schooling in England uses flexible curriculum, negotiated goals and individual attention. She emphasized that these second-chance alternatives “had to feel different from mainstream schools…” (p.78).

**What the Western Australian experience reveals**

One such program is the ‘Big Picture’ initiative offered in twelve Western Australian schools. This program began in America in 1995 and, after remarkable success, was imported into Australia in 2006 because “…too many of our young people are not achieving their potential. Many are not engaged in school learning and some do not complete school” (Big Picture Education Australia, 2014, p.2). Big Picture is a flexible learning program aimed at “educating one student at a time” (Big Picture Learning, 2015, para.1). It is focused entirely on the individual student, their situation and characteristics, helping them to find their passion. Students are then supported by a team of adults (family, teachers and community members) and provided with academic and experiential training designed to carry their passion into further education and/or employment. Academic tasks are rigorous but are concentrated either on important life skills or those areas of curriculum relevant to the student – a stark contrast to the Outline. This is exactly the same method as described by homeschooling parents of high-school-aged students in my interviews – they worked with their child in determining a desired career and then provided meaningful
academic opportunities in conjunction with appropriate training experiences to achieve that career goal.

Big Picture materials and websites are riddled with testimonies of success and claims that “major national research” validates this learning method (Big Picture, 2014, p.1). The testimonies are prolific and inspiring, detailing one young person after another who have turned their lives around from hopeless disengagement with school, and even life in general, to the position where they are now achieving success in their chosen pathway. This confirms Glines analysis:

It is well known by leaders of the Visionary Army that the best way to reach most all learners – but especially those having difficulty traditionally – is to build their learning programs based upon their strengths and interests. They may spend all day in art – their passion – in the beginning, but they eventually will be willing and want to “learn math,” too, and will do so more quickly and better than in the conventional old daily required “math time.” (2012, p.24)

The features that make programs like Big Picture work are features which are not found in traditional schools, certainly not those with prescriptive, one-size-fits-all curriculum. Actually, it is a misnomer to label the Western Australian education system ‘one-size-fits-all’ as this implies that the system can, somehow, fit all. This is clearly not the case. In its current form, our existing system does not and cannot fit all. If anything, the education system we currently have is one-size-fits-as-many-as-possible (Christensen et al., 2011, p.131) and the ‘as-many-as-possible’ decreases every time further standardization is imposed.

There is a philosophical argument to be made that the onus should be on the system to fit the child and not the other way around. Even in 1936, it was identified that:

The new curriculum must then put first things first. The child must come before subject matter as such. This is the everlasting and final condemnation of the old curriculum. It put subject matter first and it bent – or if need be broke – the child to fit the system (Kilpatrick, 1936, p.31).
Sadly, the Western Australian School Curriculum and Standards Authority is moving in the opposite direction and transitioning from a relatively progressive flexible system, the Curriculum Framework, to one with intransigent policies and inflexible design. Larissa identified, “we have to fit the mould or else.” Mandy, Sharyn and Jane just want to teach their children what they consider is most important for them, in ways that will help them learn, but instead are required to make their children conform to a generic syllabus. Why break children for the sake of an arbitrary system? Why replace high quality, individualized education with homogenous schooling? Why not start with children’s needs and mould curriculum to fit them?

Irregular regulation

Home education regulation involving mandated curriculum is ‘irregular’ in five distinct ways – it is inconsistent with the democratic ethos of our society, it contradicts current educational and neuroscientific theory, it is being applied inconsistently, it is incompatible with current economic rationalism and it even violates its own aims. I have already addressed the second of these points (see pp.163-164) and will address the remaining four irregularities in the following paragraphs.

First, prescribed curriculum is ultimately a betrayal of our democratic society (Dewey, 1903; Gatto, 1992; Glines, 2012; Heller, 2007). In 1903 (p.197) Dewey asked:

What does democracy mean save that the individual is to have a share in determining the conditions and the aims of his own work… How can we justify our belief in the democratic principle elsewhere, and then go back entirely upon it when we come to education?

It does seem more in keeping with centralization policies of communist regimes 32

32 Liu, in writing of the mass media in China states that all communist regimes must, through centralization of communication networks, at some point adopt “a general strategy of mass persuasion” aimed at disseminating “ideology and educational matter in order to transform its population into efficient and dedicated members of a Communist Society.” (Liu, 1971, p.7)
than progressive democracy to impose government-sanctioned content on every child, even those in privately funded situations where no educational neglect has been determined or is even suspected. The State does not, and should not, have a monopoly on knowledge. In an age where there is easy access to more information than could possibly be learned in a lifetime, it seems incongruous that a well-paid public servant who has never met my children could even speculate, beyond the rudimentary basics, as to what parcels of knowledge will serve them best. Why not allow privately funded home educators the choice of curriculum?

The *Australian Education Act 2013* links the educational funding for States and Territories to their uptake of the Australian Curriculum (Australian Government, 2014). Money, then, provides some rationale for the insistence of the Western Australian government to apply the Australian Curriculum yoke to all public and private schools. However, my understanding is that the entire Act is focused on commonwealth *funding for schools*. Since home educators receive no funding whatsoever, from either federal or state sources, clearly home education must fall outside the influence of this particular Act. There is no financial compulsion for Western Australian education authorities to apply the Australian Curriculum to homeschooling families.

Second, the determination of education authorities to indiscriminately apply the Australian Curriculum to homeschool settings can be questioned further in light of their endorsement of Big Picture Education Australia. Big Picture is provided in some public schools and yet, as described previously (p.176), it employs personalized curriculum. It is regrettable but understandable that schools might struggle, at a time of intensified budgetary constraints, to resource such a labour-intensive approach to education. But why deny this proven learning approach to homeschooled children who have ready access to the same kinds of personalized learning designs as Big Picture? There is clearly a double standard here. Since some students are free from the bulk of Outline constraints, it is clear that there is no imperative to “Describe events using language of ‘at least’, exclusive ‘or’ (A or B but
not both), inclusive ‘or’ (A or B or both) and ‘and’” (Year 8 mathematics syllabus). Nor can it be vital that every Australian learn to “Analyse and explain how language has evolved over time and how technology and the media have influenced language use and forms of communication” (Year 8 English syllabus) (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014b). Indeed, I know many competent adults who do not possess such intellectual fragments. This is not to say that this knowledge does not have some value to some students but there are many children who will find these snippets irrelevant and forgettable. Children with access to education that is meaningful for them and targeted to their futures should be permitted, and I believe encouraged, to follow a personalized path.

Third, it costs an estimated average of $15,000 per year to school a child in the Western Australian public system (Martin, 2013). The cost of moderating each homeschooled child is only a tiny fraction of this sum. At a time when the Western Australian government is rationalizing education expenditure and reducing funding in many schools, it makes little sense to dissuade parents from choosing self-funded models of education for their children. Parents are far less likely to fund a venture that will not achieve their preferred objectives. For financial considerations alone, the Western Australian government should do all they can to make homeschooling an attractive educational option.

Fourth, the guiding principles of the Outline are to “promote equity and excellence in Western Australian schools.” Adherence to a fixed syllabus with limited available methods will inevitably restrict the use of recognized quality learning methods such as conversational learning. In effect then, strict observance of the Outline sets a ceiling on the potential of home education and, at least in part, forces homeschool

33 If each moderator evaluated only five children a week (a highly conservative figure) for each of the forty school weeks, the saving to government would be $3,000,000 per annum minus the salary of the moderator and administration expenses.
experiences back to the level of their schooled peers. Is this really a desirable way to “promote equity”? Surely, denying students access to preferred learning methods, methods which are proven and heralded by education experts, directly violates the mandate to “promote…excellence.” Perhaps an insightful person might observe that forcing home educators to offer their children school-like morsels does not contravene the promotion of “equity and excellence in Western Australian schools” which is, after all, the guiding principle of the School Curriculum and Standards Authority’s Outline.

Parents’ perceptions are paramount

It is clear that indiscriminately applying curriculum designed for schools to home education is, at best, an afterthought – “…while the State can insist that the child’s education be moved along in a way which can be objectively measured, it cannot apply institutional standards to this non-institutionalized setting” (cited in Varnham & Squelch, 2008, p.205, emphasis mine).

In stating, “By 2015, all Australian schools will implement the full Australian Curriculum, and home educating families will be expected to do the same,” (Appendix A) education authorities are demonstrating either total ignorance of or disregard for the nature of homeschooling and a lack of empathy and respect for its proponents. Hence, parents may well feel justified in simply ignoring directives viewed as uninformed or in altering documentation to satisfy regulation perceived as irrelevant or unreasonable, even though most homeschooling parents, in my experience, believe it is appropriate for the State to oversee homeschooling in their jurisdiction.

Regulation should exist “to guard as much as possible against violations of the basic interests of children and the state while not impinging on the freedom of parents who do well by their children” (Kunzman, 2009, p.318). Not only is stringent, school-centric regulation inappropriate for home education but, as described in Chapter 2 (p. 49), strict regulation does not appear to enhance homeschooling outcomes and is
virtually impossible to police even if its application was desirable. It is relatively easy for homeschooling families to ‘fly under the radar’ if they choose to ignore registration and, even if parents do register, it is not feasible, in the short time allocated for moderation, to accurately determine the list of knowledge and skills which have been covered.

Furthermore, in an informal interview, a homeschool moderator explained that, even if a child’s educational progress was considered insufficient, authorities inevitably sought to support and work with the parents. Her belief was that “the Department has no appetite for prosecution” as court cases, without exception, play poorly in the public arena and, on the one occasion she knew when prosecution had succeeded, the decision to send a child to school had been impossible to enforce. It is therefore critical that home education regulation is perceived by homeschool practitioners as being neither excessively burdensome nor counterproductive. Home educators should be offered as much assistance as possible, not just impersonal, rigid directive.

**Freedom and trust**

“Freedom is an important ethical and academic good and should not be infringed cavalierly” (Hostetler, 2005, p.20). This is Hostetler’s reasoning:

“But what if parents want their child to learn the alphabet in preschool or want an abstinence-only program?” Or, “What if faculty colleagues want to do such-and-such research? Who are we to say they shouldn’t?”… Freedom is an important ethical and academic good and should not be infringed cavalierly. Often, maybe usually, we will not want to thwart people’s aims even if we think them mistaken.³⁴

³⁴ Original emphasis.

Freedom is of utmost importance to home educators. Rivero explains:

Homeschooling is all about freedom: the freedom to learn about history all day rather than for 50 minutes, the freedom to learn according to
curiosity and interests rather than grade-level lists of topics, the freedom
to zoom ahead in areas of strength and take as much time as necessary to
learn difficult subjects (2008, p.74).

Contrast this with Gatto’s summary of schooling experiences:
Although teachers do care and do work very, very hard, the institution is
psychopathic; it has no conscience. It rings a bell and the young man in
the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to a
different cell where he must memorize that humans and monkeys derive

Gatto was an exceptionally innovative teacher who won New York City Teacher of the
Year 1989-1991 and New York State Teacher of the Year in 1991. He resigned after
almost thirty years of teaching due largely to his frustration with an increasingly
intransigent system (Gatto, 2010, pp.xiii-ix). He reasoned:

…the temptation is to cede power to a central authority in the name of
fairness, to manage some best way for all from central headquarters.
That’s what a national curriculum is supposed to be for schools, a rational,
fair way to legislate bad schooling out of existence (1992, p.91).

That is, teachers cannot always be trusted to make wise decisions for their students
so ‘fool-proof’ curriculum must be implemented by the State as a safeguard. If
trained teachers can make unwelcomed judgments, how much more so might
parents partaking in anti-establishment activities? This is true. Homeschooling
parents do not always prioritize academic tasks in the same way as teachers and
bureaucrats do. Sometimes parents might choose not to cover standard material in
favour of obscure content of interest or relevance to their child or to cover less
information but in greater depth. Parents, with a holistic view of their child, may not
push a certain concept as hard as a teacher who sees only the mathematics student.
Parents are motivated by what is best for the child not what is best for the scholar.
This is supported by Aurini and Davies who observed of North American home
educators: “Rather than championing educational competition and rigor, many

This does not mean that such children are receiving a substandard education but it is a specialized education, tailored just for them. They are being offered learning opportunities from an adult who knows them well, cares about them immensely and is fully invested in their education and their future success. As Ray eloquently states:

Most proponents of homeschooling only want to make sure that their personally chosen curriculum is taught to their children. These folks are not asking for money or power to teach their beliefs/curriculum to anyone else. They are asking the state and their neighbors to assume that they, the parents, have the best interests of their children and society’s common good in mind (2000, p.287).

Parents are trusted to know what is best for their children for the first five years of their lives and then on weekends, on holidays and for 18 hours of each school day. Is it not reasonable to trust parents, who are volunteering for the extra responsibility, to extend their goodwill and efforts to this additional facet of their children’s lives?

A culture of trust is essential if overregulation and one-size-fits-as-many-as-possible restrictions on quality learning practices are to be avoided. If developed, a culture of trust can reap abundant rewards both for families and communities. In 2011, the OECD published a 259 page document titled *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States*. One chapter examined the Finnish education system for the lessons it could provide the United States. The conclusion expounded two “final observations” (OECD, 2011, p.131); the first being that Finnish educational reforms were more the result of larger cultural changes than “central initiatives that the government was trying to push through the system.” The second observation relates to the substantial autonomy of Finnish teachers over curriculum and assessment decisions – the lesson here being the importance of trust:
Trust, of course, cannot be legislated. Consequently, this lesson may be the least useful to others wanting to learn from Finland…The fact that there seems to be very little interest in Finland in instituting the assessment and external accountability regimes that have characterised the reform strategies of many OECD countries, most prominently the US and the UK [and Australia], is perhaps the best evidence of the fundamental trust that seems to exist between the educators and the community. Given the extraordinary performance of the Finnish system over the past decade, this is a lesson others might want to study (OECD, 2011, p.131).

When educators are motivated to serve their students well and are afforded flexible frameworks in which to operate, it appears high quality learning outcomes will likely follow. Evidence suggests that the vast majority of home educators, if granted educational freedoms, would use them constructively for the advancement of their children’s education. This was certainly so for those I interviewed. Again, I say with Hostetler, “Freedom is an important ethical and academic good and should not be infringed cavalierly.”

Regulation recommendations
It is detrimental to demand that all children learn the exact same information and skills during their schooling years and it is impossible to police such a directive even if it were desirable. Home education regulation must then be minimal and, like homeschooling itself, must be flexible in its application. With few exceptions, most parents would find it reasonable to establish some advancement in children’s literacy and numeracy and demonstrate that each student had been offered opportunities to pursue other avenues of study. This could be achieved in a number of ways, affording parents a choice compatible with their approach. This will necessarily result in different kinds of accountability for different people but this is not a new reality – regulation is already being applied differently by different moderators.
Choice of curriculum must be protected – personalized education does not work without it. There are many good curricula available to home educators – some text book based, some project based, some computer based. The Singapore Maths course, for example, is popular with many home educators. As a mathematics teacher I was asked to evaluate this program several years ago by a friend considering its use. I found it to be thorough, rigorous and suitable for the development of foundational mathematics skills. There is no reason why a parent who has used such a program with her older children and is comfortable with its format should need to buy new text books or else justify how it covers each point in the Outline. There are many such courses for each of the eight learning areas and many accessible cross-curricula approaches. Parents want their children to develop good skills and understanding and most of the parents I interviewed showed the desire and capability to diligently seeking out suitable resources to achieve this. Most participants demonstrated ongoing assessment of resources, always looking to improve the opportunities they were delivering.

If given the option, I believe that some homeschooling parents would choose to use some aspects of the Outline in preference to other materials. When starting out, Mary was unsure of what to cover for science, so she turned to the Outline for guidance. She later switched to an on-line science course, which she found more suitable. Jenny wanted comparability between what her son and his peers were learning in mathematics and English although she sought topics of interest for him in all other learning areas. For parents just starting homeschooling or choosing to homeschool for a fixed period, curriculum similarity with schools may be particularly attractive. Helen appreciated having ready-made resources to fall back on if she was struggling to organize more personalized learning activities for her daughter. The growing pool of available Australian Curriculum materials does simplify lesson preparation – an attractive option for busy homeschooling mothers.
An alternative checklist for home educating families
John Barratt-Peacock, an experienced Australian educator, home educator and researcher, forwarded an insightful submission to the 2014 New South Wales Inquiry into Homeschooling. This submission included the following alternative checklist for the assessment of homeschooling (Barratt-Peacock, 2014, p.9):

1. Do the children appear to be happy, healthy and contented?
2. Is their social behaviour age appropriate in a range of situations?
3. Does the house and surrounds provide a healthy environment?
4. Do individual children demonstrate a healthy personal curiosity with independent preferences and interests?
5. Is interpersonal communication demonstrably sound and developmentally appropriate?
6. Can the parent show a sufficient number and range of resources in the learning environments? This is not limited to professionally or commercially produced school-like learning materials.
7. What contribution do the children make to the running of the home and is this within their skills and capabilities?
8. What networks and friendships have the family and children developed in the local community and how do they serve their local community?

Such a checklist provides a meaningful picture of a child’s development and necessitates substantially less time and paperwork than evaluating the copious checkpoints of the Outline. I recommend that it be used in conjunction with one of the following suggested pathways.

Suggested pathways for moderation
Irrespective of curricula choice, there are many ways to demonstrate a child’s educational progress. One moderation option is to allow homeschooled children to
attend a local school to sit the NAPLAN\textsuperscript{35} or OLNA\textsuperscript{36} tests. These tests examine basic language and numeracy skills and contain recognized minimum benchmarks. If a child achieves above the minimum benchmarks for their age group, I believe this demonstrates sufficient academic success for that year. If academic problems are evident, further moderation could then be undertaken. This would have been my preferred method of moderation, however, I know this would not suit everyone.

Some families would welcome a portfolio approach based on project work or work from text books. Project work, in particular, allows children to demonstrate substantial creativity and effort across several learning areas. A third method of moderation is to allow homeschooled children the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities to read, to calculate and to talk about their projects. Most homeschooled children I know love a captive audience.

The moderation options suggested above would likely result in significant savings of moderators’ time over the current laborious but deficient system. These savings could be directed at offering greater assistance to those few who need it. For example, moderators could offer practical help showing struggling parents how to source useful websites, or perhaps they could offer demonstrations of how to tutor children in a particular concept. Home education moderators could become recognized as resource people who are readily approachable for advice regarding specific concepts, possible resources or suspected learning difficulties. They could offer low-cost photocopying and scanning services and a range of foreign language CDROMs, science equipment and mathematics manipulatives which could be borrowed in ways similar to a toy library. Moderators could become people who facilitate rather than judge. This kind of collaboration is much more likely to improve learning opportunities for children whose parents are struggling than simply imposing

\textsuperscript{35} NAPLAN tests are conducted in May each year for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The four areas tested are reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy.

\textsuperscript{36} OLNA – On-line Literacy and Numeracy Assessment are usually sat in Year 10 and provides a path for demonstrating the minimum standard of literacy and numeracy required for to function in society.
impersonal, complicated directives without consideration of circumstances or children’s inherent capabilities and challenges. This kind of regulatory framework targets cases of need and does not waste time on, for example, policing the nature of foreign language exposure of children who are clearly making solid educational progress.

**Research limitations**

Qualitative research based on a small number of interviews, cannot conclusively claim to represent the views of all home educators in Western Australia. There are some groups who were not represented at all. For example, I deliberately avoided seeking the views of home educators who purchase packaged curriculum as they are not compelled to personally develop strategies to adopt the Australian Curriculum. I suspect these parents are barely aware of the curriculum transition taking place. Also, parents content with the status quo had little incentive to participate in this research – I had several parents decline an interview as they saw no personal need for such a study. This suggests that parents dissatisfied with the current regulatory system are overrepresented amongst my participants. Likewise, no parents neglecting their children’s educational needs saw fit to volunteer for this study.

Because of time restrictions, travelling distances and the inherently busy lives of home educators, I chose to conduct only a single interview with each participant. Though each person had some time between our initial contact and the interview to formally construct their position, I feel that some responses were coloured by recent circumstances and may have been different if the interview had occurred at another time. For example, Jenny mentioned several times that she was having trouble concentrating because of changes in her medication and Mandy’s interview was conducted the morning after a very difficult night with her son in hospital (she may have consumed a substantial amount of caffeine). Also, some participants seemed to give contradictory statements throughout the interview. Having one or two follow up interviews would likely have established a pattern in each participant’s responses.
I believe the timing of the interviews was particularly significant to the findings of this research. Being conducted in March (2014), shortly after the start of the school year and receipt of the second Moderators’ Letter (Appendix B), I suspect that participants had not yet been able to work through the practical implications of the additional information contained in the letter. Also, as the letter was somewhat confusing and impersonal, it is likely that any ill-feeling was heightened at this time. This was not deliberate. My intention was to receive ethics approval by November 2013 in order to conduct interviews in December. Had this occurred, however, only information from the first Moderators’ Letter (Appendix A) would have been factored into parents’ responses. It would be interesting to conduct follow-up interviews now, a year after the initial conversations, when participants have had time to familiarize themselves with their own moderator’s position and implement their measured responses.

Lastly, it should be reiterated that, while the highly lauded learning methods on which I have focused throughout this project have been available to all home educators, not every parent has used them to great effect. It certainly took some years before situated learning became an appreciated feature in my home. I blame this largely on my teacher training and am thankful that most other home educators are not hampered with this same baggage.

**Further research**

The role of the home education moderator is crucial to the freedoms available to homeschooling families – if home educators satisfy their moderator, they fulfil their regulatory obligations. The moderators discussed in this research had significant discretionary powers ranging from granting special concessions and leniency through to implementing additional monthly accountability measures. However, it appears that prerequisite understandings and skills of home education moderators and their ongoing professional development show no appreciation for the important, inherent differences between classroom teaching and homeschooling. This directly impacts those they supervise. Thus, the equipping of moderators to assess and support such non-standard and varied educational practices deserves further investigation.
As much homeschool regulation is targeted at safeguarding against poor education practices, a worthy focus for additional research would be to identify and profile families which do fail to advance their children’s education. Assessing their motives for homeschooling and establishing points of deficiency may well suggest alternate structures which can be implemented to avoid onerous and indiscriminate regulation being applied to all.

**Conclusion**

Parents don’t choose homeschooling so they can ‘do school’ at home. They take responsibility for their children’s education primarily to offer learning experiences in harmony with *their* needs and to educate them for *their* future. This works. There is an abundance of research and testimonies to demonstrate that homeschooling, with its focus on the individual, is highly successful even when other educational options have proven ineffective. Thus, mainstream schools employ individualized, learner-conscious education to succeed where standardized routes have failed. But the success of these alternatives hinges on choice – choice of method and choice of curriculum. Choice in education can be a powerful agent of good and should not be encroached on lightly.

When I began this research, my primary assumption was that families who employed natural learning methods to educate their children would be most affected by the mandate to use a fixed syllabus. While this does appear true to some extent, I am now convinced that, of those home educators who do not purchase set curricula, this mandate will be directly detrimental to all but the most structured of families. A much better predictor of the difficulty to implement the Outline, appears to be the number of children in the family who are educated at home – families with one homeschooled child seemed able to adjust irrespective of their methodology, whereas, families with multiple homeschooled children struggled to balance the demands of the Outline with their children’s needs. This balance was particularly difficult for a parent whose child had learning difficulties.
At a time when schools are turning to less school-like methods for marginalized students, the Education Department of Western Australia and the School Curriculum and Standards Authority have devised regulation which compels homeschooled to become more like schools. Choice of content and freedom of method are now only available to those who have an empathetic moderator, are willing to falsify documentation or do not submit to registration. Law-abiding homeschooling parents are being directed to bend, or if need be, to break, their children to fit a prescriptive syllabus, the Outline, designed by bureaucrats with neo-liberal priorities (Ditchburn, 2012a, Ditchburn, 2012b). This will be “the everlasting and final condemnation” (Kilpatrick, 1936, p.31) of the Australian Curriculum.

Throughout this and previous chapters, I have detailed many reasons why the mandated use of prescriptive curricula, and in particular the Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline, for all home educators in Western Australia, is irrational. These reasons include:

1. It is undemocratic – it is not consistent with the progressive, liberal ethos of our society (see pp. 178-9).
2. It violates the findings of a substantial pool of educational and neuroscientific research (see pp. 17-24, 164-6, 174-6).
3. It contradicts the beliefs of many acclaimed educational experts (see pp. 19, 30, 40-43, 174).
4. It ignores the innumerable first-hand accounts of those who have been broken by intransigent systems and those who have blossomed in learner-centred environments (see pp. 175-7).
5. It does not contribute to the stated aims of educational excellence and equity. (see pp. 174-6, 180-181).
6. It is not consistent with the Education Department’s own practices – elements within public schools are permitted substantial flexibilities (see pp.176-7).
7. It is complicated and virtually impossible to accurately evaluate (see p.171).
8. It is unenforceable – parents, focused on their children’s wellbeing, will readily invent ways to avoid it (see pp. 155-6, 181-2).
9. It will not help to improve the practices of those few home educators who are not meeting their children’s educational needs (see pp.181-2).

10. It will inevitably cost the government more (see p.180).

Successful regulation is dependent on the goodwill of homeschooling parents. Formally advising parents to begin implementing a generic and complicated syllabus riddled with theoretical jargon without any consultation or assistance, will not contribute to this. Many parents who believe this directive is not in the best interest of their children will feel justified in ignoring it, modifying it, providing deceptive accountability documentation or not registering at all. Regulation, then, must be aimed at limiting gross educational neglect and not on burdening and restricting parents who are doing well by their children. There are more accurate, less onerous ways to evaluate the appropriateness of home education experiences than those currently being authorized. Such regulation will cost the Western Australian government nothing but will greatly benefit home educators, their children and their communities.

I began this thesis convinced that educational authorities simply did not appreciate the nature of home education and its capacity to afford superior educational opportunities for those who are blessed enough to have parents both willing and able to educate them at home. I believed that current regulation changes could only be sanctioned if authorities were largely unaware of the power of being able to meet a child at their point of need and of using relevant contexts and the spark of a child’s own indwelling interests to extend their understandings. I was, sadly, quite mistaken. Through my correspondence with the Western Australian Minister for Education, Mr. Peter Collier, and his office, through my meeting with Mr. Neil Milligan, the Regional Executive Director of the Southwest Education Office and through this research, I have become convinced that any perceived lack of understanding is actually a cultivated ignorance. It is far easier to say “and homeschooling families will be expected to do the same” than to admit that school-like methods are not the instruments of universal good they were intended to be and
design revolutionary regulation that maximizes the benefits of homeschooling. Home education is focused on individual children – there are no standardized methods or motivations. Nor should there be standardized regulation. Educational authorities must put children before curriculum, people before systems. I believe that flexible regulation will eventuate as the current system becomes ever more unworkable and the move to more personalized education becomes an increasing focus in Australia, as it has elsewhere. This is particularly likely when viewed in conjunction with continued advances in the development and capacity of technology to provide individualized learning experiences. For the sake of our children, our communities and our nation, I believe that it has to.
Appendix A: Moderators’ Letter, Nov 2012

Dear Megan,

The Director General has now formally advised home education moderators that home schooling families should begin implementing the four learning areas of the Australian Curriculum that are now available, English, Mathematics, Science and History. This is the web address for the curriculum:

http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/

By clicking on the Curriculum link at the top of the web page, multiple learning areas can be viewed for a single year level, or you can view, for example, the English curriculum across multiple year levels. This allows families who are home schooling one, two, or more children to personalise their view of the curriculum according to their circumstances.

Over the next two years, the remaining learning areas of the curriculum (Geography, Languages, Civics and Citizenship, The Arts, Economics, Business, Health and Physical Education, Information and Communication Technology and Design and Technology) will be rolled out. By 2015, all Australian schools will implement the full Australian Curriculum, and home-schooling families will be expected to do the same.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which is rolling out the Australian National Curriculum, is still in the early stages of developing the Economics and Business learning areas, and these will possibly just be implemented from Year 5 or 6 in primary school as a basic introduction to the development of further knowledge and skills in secondary school.

Please feel free to get in touch if you have any questions or comments. You may also wish to contact ACARA directly on 1300 895 583.

And finally, a reminder that Pre-Primary is a compulsory year of school from 2013, and that all children who are five years old on or before 30 June 2013 need to be enrolled. Please contact us as soon as possible if you have a child of this age who is not yet enrolled in Home Education.

Kind regards,

GREG MILLER & ALI ROUNDTREE
HOME EDUCATION MODERATORS
MANJIMUP LOCAL EDUCATION OFFICE

23 November, 2012
Appendix B: Moderators’ Letter, Feb 2014

Government of Western Australia
Department of Education

Southwest Regional Education Office - Bunbury

Transitioning to the Australian Curriculum
Guidelines for Home Education 2014

These guidelines aim to provide practical advice to home educators regarding the transition to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.

Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline

As you will be aware, the Australian Curriculum has been in development and is being phased in to replace the Curriculum Framework in Western Australia. Phase 1 of the Australian Curriculum is to be fully implemented by the start of 2015.

The School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) has responsibility for developing the Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline (the Outline) for all students K-10 across the range of education sectors in Western Australia. The Outline sets out the curriculum, guiding principles for teaching, learning and assessment, and support for student assessment and reporting of achievement. It incorporates the Australian Curriculum and provides access to the remaining Curriculum Framework learning areas still in use. Outline can be accessed through www.scapes.wa.edu.au.

SCSA has advised that all educational programs, including home education programs, must reflect the Outline’s content, general capabilities and achievement standards. The Outline is a ‘one-stop shop’ that ensures education providers (including home educators) are meeting all the requirements for the education of children in Western Australia. Therefore, the Outline is now the reference point for home educators and for home education evaluation meetings.

A diverse range of approaches and philosophies are used in home education. Some home educators however, may need to add to and adjust their programs to ensure they meet the requirements of the Outline.

Planning and Documentation

Overall planning should begin with the needs of the child, with reference to the Outline. Children may require a differentiated learning program, with different year level content in different learning areas, according to their capabilities and/ or attainment.

A range of methods may be used to demonstrate the cycle of planning, implementing, monitoring, feedback and onward planning.

Program content

Many resources being produced are now linked to the Australian Curriculum and should be selected on the basis of their suitability for the child, not necessarily school year level. Scootle (http://www.scootle.edu.au/maths/teacher/) is a particularly useful site for parents to access material to support the Australian Curriculum.

In many instances home educators already have valuable resources they have used in previous years. These resources were written for alternative curricula or as one-off resources and may not show direct links to the Australian Curriculum’s content. Home educators may decide to continue using these materials if they can demonstrate how they cover the Australian Curriculum’s content over time. In some instances these materials may require supplementing to cover key content areas.
Please note that the titles for learning areas are changing. The new learning area titles are below:

- English
- Mathematics
- Science
- Humanities and Social Sciences (including Civics and Citizenship, Economics and Business, Geography, History, Work Studies). Refer to both Australian Curriculum History and Society and Environment (Curriculum Framework) for planning until this area is fully transitioned.
- Languages
- The Arts (including Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music, Visual Arts)
- Health and Physical Education
- Technologies (including Design and Technology, Digital Technologies)

General Capabilities
The general capabilities should be interwoven and embedded into the curriculum content and activities. They relate to life skills. While they require specific consideration to enrich the program for the child, they do not usually require documentation.

Achievement standards/monitoring of progress
For 2014 we are advising home educators to become familiar with the achievement standards and the Scope and Sequence charts as they are helpful tools for identifying a child's progress. The Scope & Sequence charts are useful for tracking progress in both linear (all one year level) and non-linear programs such as modified or eclectic programs.

Evaluation meetings
Evaluation meetings in 2014 will be very similar to evaluation meetings of the past. The primary focus will remain on the suitability and effectiveness of the program and on the child's progress. Concerns will be specified and timeframes given for further reviews.

Southwest Education Region – Bunbury, evaluation proformas will be updated from time to time. If home educators would like to access the relevant evaluation proforma prior to evaluation meetings, they may email the moderator to request the Parent Reference Evaluation proforma.

It is much appreciated when home educators complete a short summary of the key texts, resources, and activities of each learning area prior to the evaluation meeting. While there is no obligation to complete this summary prior to the meeting, it does provide a framework for an efficient evaluation and it can be attached to the moderator’s evaluation report. Home educators are welcome to use their own format for this summary or it can be completed on the Parent Reference Evaluation proforma.

In summary, home educators are advised to familiarise themselves with, and plan for, the Western Australian Curriculum and Assessment Outline. Please note that these guidelines have been prepared to provide some assistance and clarity regarding the Outline’s implementation in home education in 2014 as a transition year. Further advice and information will be provided as it becomes available.

Julie Snow
Julie.Snow@education.wa.edu.au

HOME EDUCATION MODERATOR
SOUTHWEST REGIONAL EDUCATION OFFICE – BUNBURY

28 February 2014
Appendix C: Letters to Participants

Information letter for participants (original)

Information letter and letter of invitation (Interviews)

Homeschooling and the Australian Curriculum

Megan Kammann
PO Box 64
MANJIMUP WA 6258
Telephone: (08) 9771 8889
megankammann@outlook.com

13 December 2013

Dear

My name is Megan Kammann and I am currently undertaking research with Murdoch University regarding how Western Australian home educators are responding to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum. As a former homeschooling mum (I homeschooled my three sons for 15 years until December 2012) I am really interested in the changes that are being made to accommodate the new required curriculum.

You are invited to participate in an initial interview as I am keen to discuss your experiences as a home educator – your motivations, methods and other related issues. Your participation in the interview is entirely voluntary. I anticipate that it will last about 1 hour. I am happy to meet you at a time and location of your choice. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. You may withdraw at any time without discrimination or prejudice. Your privacy is important and all information will be treated as confidential and no names or other details that might identify you will be used in any publication arising from this research. If you withdraw, all the information you have provided will be destroyed up until it has been assimilated with other data. It will be my intention to follow the initial interview with a second in which we can elaborate on any points of interest and discuss your response to the Australian Curriculum in greater detail.

It is possible that there may be no direct benefit to you from participation in this study though it is hoped that the information gained will increase the understanding of the methods and motivations of home educators in WA and may provide direction for future homeschool regulation. I am happy to forward to you a summary of findings from this research.

If you are happy with these arrangements and choose to participate in an interview, please reply to this email stating a time and location for the interview that is convenient for you.

My supervisors and I are happy to discuss any concerns you may have about this study.

Sincerely

Megan Kammann
Researcher

Megan Kammann (Researcher)
Nado Aveling (Principal Supervisor)
Deborah Pino-Pasternak (Co-Supervisor)

This study has been approved by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2013/220). If you have any reservation or complaint about the ethical conduct of this research, and wish to talk with an independent person, you may contact Murdoch University's Research Ethics Office (Tel. 08 9360 6997) or e-mail ethics@murdoch.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Information letter and letter of invitation (Interviews)

Homeschooling in Western Australia

Megan Kammann
PO Box 64
MANJIMUP WA 6258
Telephone: (08) 9771 8889
megankammann@outlook.com

25 February 2014

Dear

My name is Megan Kammann and I am currently undertaking research with Murdoch University regarding how Western Australian home educators are responding to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum. As a former homeschooling mum (I homeschooled my three sons for 15 years until December 2012) I am really interested in how you educate your child(ren) and how the new curriculum might affect you. You don’t need to have a thorough knowledge of the Australian Curriculum, just a good understanding of what works for you and your family.

You are invited to participate in an initial interview as I am keen to discuss your experiences as a home educator – your motivations, methods and other related issues. Your participation in the interview is entirely voluntary. I anticipate that it will last about 1 hour. I am happy to meet you at a time and location of your choice. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded. You may withdraw at any time without discrimination or prejudice and the information you have provided will be destroyed if possible. Your privacy is important and all information will be treated as confidential and no names or other details that might identify you will be used in any publication arising from this research. If needed, the initial interview can be followed up with a second in which we can elaborate further on any points of interest.

It is possible that there may be no direct benefit to you from participation in this study though it is hoped that the information gained will increase the understanding of the methods and motivations of home educators in WA and may provide direction for future homeschool regulation. I am happy to forward to you a summary of findings from this research.

If you are happy with these arrangements and choose to participate in an interview, please reply to this email (at megankammann@outlook.com or by phone on 9771 8889) stating a time and location for the interview that is convenient for you.

My supervisors and I are happy to discuss any concerns you may have about this study.

Sincerely

Megan Kammann
Researcher

Megan Kammann
(Researcher)

Nado Aveling
(Principal Supervisor)

Deborah Pino-Pasternak
(Co-Supervisor)

This study has been approved by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2013/220). If you have any reservation or complaint about the ethical conduct of this research, and wish to talk with an independent person, you may contact Murdoch University’s Research Ethics Office (Tel. 08 9360 6677) or e-mail ethics@murdoch.edu.au). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Consent Form

Homeschooling and the Australian Curriculum

I have read the participant information sheet, which explains the nature of the research and the possible risks. The information has been explained to me and all my questions have been satisfactorily answered. I have been given a copy of the information sheet to keep.

I am happy to be interviewed and for the interview to be audio recorded as part of this research. I understand that I do not have to answer particular questions if I do not want to and that I can withdraw at any time without needing to give a reason and without consequences to myself. I will be given a copy of relevant transcripts and will be given the opportunity to clarify any issues before they are synthesized into the research data.

I agree that research data from the results of the study may be published provided my name or any identifying data is not used. I have also been informed that I may not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study.

I understand that all information provided by me is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher to a third party unless required to do so by law.

Participant’s name: __________________________

Signature of Participant: __________________________ Date: ……/……/……

I confirm that I have provided the Information Letter concerning this study to the above participant; I have explained the study and have answered all questions asked of me.

Signature of researcher: __________________________ Date: ……/……/……
Appendix D: Interview Guideline Questions

**Broad Intention**
Interviews will be semi-structured and in-depth. My intention is to begin with some simple questions and then ask more open ended questions. I really want to allow the participant as much space as they like to follow areas which have meaning for them. These are guide questions only and will probably be asked over two separate interviews.

**Demographic**
How long have you been homeschooling?
How many children do you have and how many are homeschooled at the moment?

**Motivations**
What does homeschooling mean to you?
What are your main reasons for homeschooling your child/ren?
What do you think are the main benefits of homeschooling?
What do you value the most about being able to homeschool your children?

**Methods**
How do you go about homeschooling?
What sort of approach do you have?
What are the main resources that you use?
Who chooses what your children learn and the way they learn it?
Can you describe a ‘typical’ day?

**The Australian Curriculum**
What is your understanding of the Australian Curriculum?
Have you begun using the Australian Curriculum?
How have you changed your methods/resources to accommodate the Australian Curriculum?
Have you read or downloaded the lists of contents for each subject?
Do you feel comfortable enough to use the Australian Curriculum or would you like more information about it?
How does the Australian Curriculum ‘fit’ with what you want to do with your family?
Appendix E: Transcription Conventions

In transcribing the twelve interviews, I have conformed largely to the conventions recommended by Powers (2005) but have supplemented these with some notation used in Forced Alignment & Vowel Extraction (FAVE, 2011). I have further modified some specific elements to fit this particular project. Most notably, I have eliminated many of the disfluencies (such as ‘um’, ‘ah’, and ‘you know’) which disrupt the flow of speech. Also, disfluencies caused by the accidental repetition of words have generally been removed. For example, “I found that agreeing together meant higher motivation which obviously, which was obviously in my best interest” has been quoted as, “I found that agreeing together meant higher motivation which was obviously in my best interest”. Additionally, rather than use a complicated system of notation where some symbols are only used once or twice, I have preferred to use a small number of symbols which are supplemented, where necessary, by the use of specific and relevant clarification within angle brackets (< >).

The following is a list of symbols as I have used them in transcription:

- [.] Pause
- … Some material from the original transcript has been intentionally omitted.
- <laughing> Explanation added to the original speech, for example describing non-verbal responses or context.
- (?) guessed words The best guess of words which were difficult to hear.
- (???) An indiscernible word or phrase.
- **Emphasis** Emphasis of a word.
- so::: A prolonging of the sound just preceding the colons – the more colons, the more the syllable or sound is stretched.
- A B C Letters that are pronounced individually.
- *arckkk Phonetic spelling of a non-standard word or utterance.
- Interru– An abrupt cut-off
References


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