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STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Australian home educated students on self-regulation opportunities at home and in school

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Abstract: Self-regulation is a core life quality and human right in democratic societies. The views and experiences of Australian students who had transitioned between home education and conventional schools were sought to explore the similarities and differences between two educationally diverse systems. Through qualitative research using guided interview questions these students were asked to identify similarities and differences in their experiences of home education and conventional schooling that were then analysed through grounded theory and interpreted through historical sociocultural theory. Students identified and highly valued three types of opportunities for self-regulation while learning at home, which were not available to them while attending conventional schools. Cultural differences between home and conventional schools were identified as major contributing factors to these different opportunities to engage in self-regulation. This research illustrates ways conventional schooling could learn to develop more effective programmes to achieve this highly valued characteristic from home education practices and better prepare students for an engaged and effective adult life.

Subjects: Development Studies; Education; Social Psychology

Keywords: home education; home-school; homeschool; self-regulation; self-direction; agency; autonomy; historical sociocultural theory; self-determined learning, student voice



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Glenda M. Jackson completed his PhD in Education at Monash University (2009), where her topic explored the transition experiences of students who moved between home education and conventional schools and included the perspectives of parents and educators. She has many years of experience in secondary education. She has been asked to make submissions to government and appear before parliamentary committees to speak about home education practices in Australia. As a consultant to parents, educators and community members, she is interested in exploring more inclusive and student empowering approaches in education.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

What can we learn from students who have uniquely experienced both home education and conventional schools? Educators can become lost in educational jargon, rigmarole, ideological biases and the demands of the profession, government and societal expectations. Why not listen to students who have experienced two very different learning environments? My research sort answers to these questions through interviews using open-ended questions of 40 students who had moved between home education and conventional schools. While at home, these students were able to make decisions about what, when, where, how and why they learnt anything. In school, they were quick to identify institutional structures and cultural features that severely limited their personal choices. If one's ability to make all kinds of life decisions contributes to success in adult life, where do our educational systems provide effective environments to achieve this autonomy? These students' responses challenge many educational stereotypes.

1. Introduction

Australian students who had experienced learning in both conventional schools and at home through home education identified their ability to make a wide range of decisions about their learning experiences and environment at home as the most important aspect of learning at home. They noted the absence of this ability in conventional schools as the most significant negative feature of their conventional school experience. Although a grounded theoretical approach was initially used to analyse the data, a Vygotskian historical sociocultural lens is used here to explore these cultural differences to better understand the cultural features of both educational environments that empower or impede student ability to be agentic and self-regulating.

2. Historical sociocultural discussion of self-regulation

Autonomy, the ability to make one's own decisions, is a basic human need and right and has been the core theme of educators and critical theorists seeking social justice for a century or more. There are various philosophical approaches to understanding the concepts of free will and the ability to be self-regulating which are always informed by our understanding of human nature and the will. Many references to freedom have meant freedom from constraint or "unencumbered pursuit of the objects of desire" and are usually based on Descartes' premise that one's will is the product of a separation of the mind and the world (Derry, 2004, p. 115). Vygotsky, in keeping with Spinoza's interpretations, thought that one's free will arose from knowledge or "intellect", and that these attributes were both process and product of one's history, society and culture (Derry, 2004, p. 117; Stetsenko, 2013).

Our understanding of freedom, whether overtly or implicitly understood, will inevitably inform our educational practice as is particularly evident in "child centred education" where the right of children to pursue their own interests is held as the central tenet (Derry, 2004; Stetsenko, 2013).

Historical sociocultural theorists, as materialists, have developed a unique definition and understanding of these terms. Vygotsky's objective, like many of his colleagues and followers, was to develop a theory of agentic development that was both grounded in science and history and empowered individuals and communities to change the direction of their environments (Bruner, 2004).

All the developmental steps identified by Vygotsky and his associates, such as inter and intramental thinking and learning, language, the significance of socially collaborative practices, cultural tools, mediation and the concept of the zone of proximal development, highlight our social connectedness and focus on explaining how a child develops into an effective agentic adult within his or her community, society and culture (Stetsenko, 2008).

Although Vygotsky was unable to fully develop his theories, others from various branches of sociocultural theory have furthered this theoretical development within a materialist framework (Bruner, 2004; Derry, 2004; Leont'ev, 1978, 2005; Sannino & Laitinen, 2015; Stetsenko, 2008, 2013).

Importantly, historical socioculturalists interpret an individual's decision-making as an activity inherently integral to one's social and cultural context rather than as the activity of unique individuals functioning independently to their environments (Stetsenko, 2013). The will, as the ability to be agentic, has been described as the power to generate concepts and decisions from within one's own thoughts leading to action in the external world (Leont'ev, 2005).

There are different types of agency, a term also understood as self-regulation. Individuals who learn to collaborate with others can develop strong relational agency (Edwards, 2005), while, in contrast, decision-making that maintains the status quo has been described as passive agency (Stetsenko, 2013). The ultimate form of agency has been referred to as "transformational agency" (Sannino, 2015; Stetsenko, 2013) and refers to the process of learning from history and culture to develop a vision of a better future to work towards. We learn and experience agency within the historical and sociocultural environments in which we find ourselves. This agency is connected to our

historical and sociocultural reality so that the decisions and actions we take are firmly embedded in and relational to that reality. This ensures that agency is authentic, relevant and connected to our experienced lives.

It is within this historical sociocultural framework of understanding that self-regulation, as practiced by Australian home educated students, is further explored.

3. Home education research and autonomy

Until recently, the topic of home educated student autonomy research has been sparse. Recent overseas projects focusing on student autonomy have noted that home educated students experienced significantly more autonomy than their conventionally educated peers (Riley, 2015, 2016) and that this autonomy was a central aspect of their learning environment (van Schalkwyk & Bouwer, 2011; Thomas & Pattison, 2013). Australian research has consistently noted the presence of student autonomy as an aspect of the home education experience (Brosnan, 1991; Jackson, 2009; Jacob et al., 1991; Reilly, 2004; Thomas, 1998).

4. The Australian student experiences of autonomy

4.1. Self-regulation as experienced by home educated students

In a larger qualitative research project exploring the experience of transition between home education and conventional schooling from the perspectives of parents (28), professional educators (17) and students (40), the student group identified autonomy as their most valued quality of their home education experience (Jackson, 2009).

The home-educating population in Australia is currently unknowable (Jackson, 2009), however, willing participants were found through snowballing techniques (Wiersma, 1995) while grounded theory was initially used to analyse the data (LeCompte, Priessle, & Tesch, 1993). Guided open-ended interview questions were used to illicit responses from all participants. Student references to flexibility, freedom and personal decision-making accounted for twice as many references as the next referred to concept, that of learning, and far outweighed all other topics students listed as relevant.

Students appreciated self-directing their learning experiences in three ways: through flexibility, especially of time, through freedom—especially from structure, and through self-regulation of when, where, what, how and why one engaged in education. Because meaning and intention are important in sociocultural theory these responses were then analysed in order of the degree of autonomy exercised by these students.

4.2. Flexibility of time use, pace of learning and curriculum

Fifteen students used the word “flexible” to describe what they valued about learning opportunities at home as illustrated in the following comments.

I liked the flexibility and being at home. (Alysia-16)

It allows me to choose, what, how the days are run, and everything like that. (Brock-10)

Home schooling ... gave flexibility ... [to] do what [I] want to when [I] want to. (Vicki-17) (Jackson, 2009, p. 167)

Flexibility was a term used to describe the ability to set an individual pace in learning, to manage time and to be involved in determining various aspects of the curriculum on a daily and long-term basis. It is well established in Australian research that there are three major categories of curriculum style used in home education—structured, eclectic and informal learning (Jackson, 2009). All students who used eclectic or informal learning approaches valued being able to select topics of personal interest. Those students who used externally prepared curriculum expressed the greatest discontent with their home education experience and explained that it was often boring work,

mismatched to their needs and interests, although they did value their ability to select relevant electives as opportunities arose.

4.3. Freedom

Seventeen students referred to their “freedom” or their ability to be “free” as one of the positive features of being home educated.

Mostly the freedom ... there isn't that much structure so you can pretty much chose to do what you want ... you don't have to do anything ... there's no, you must do this then, then this, then this, then this. So it's more flexible in doing what you want to do. (Arden-17)

When I want to learn about things-You look at them whenever you like, you don't have to learn about them between 9 o' clock and 3.30. (Sam-10) (Jackson, 2009, p. 168)

Most of these references to freedom were specifically about their freedom to set their own times for learning, playing or being involved in individual interests and hobbies. Students were able to work early or late, according to their own preferences with sleep, study and recreation times, but they were also able to work on long-term projects of personal interest in areas such as writing, music, science, photography and computers. In contrast to their school experiences, they felt free from the regimentation of set curriculum, seating plans and timetables, school uniforms, long daily bus trips, studying in set locations and being tied to the class average ability.

4.4. Choice of educational institution

Eleven students spoke appreciatively of their ability to choose to stay at home or to attend conventional school or institutions of further education, a choice made either of their own accord or in conjunction with their parents.

With [primary] school ... the entire reason for pushing [the] issue [to go to school], it actually ... wanting to go vs. Mum and Dad both saying “No, you don't want to do this” ... was purely to my reasoning was to make friends ... and ... have some so-called social contact. (Jarratt-21)

I knew I would [return to school]. Things pass, you get over it. And in the end ... I thought, there was no point wasting my time, I may as well ... just go back to school, who cares. So I just got over it like that. (John-14)

I was kind of happy, knowing that I was leaving for home school ... Ah, yeah! To get out of [it]. (Luke-10) (Jackson, 2009, p. 168-169)

A further eight students described how they were involved in discussions with their parents about attendance at conventional schools or other educational institutions such as TAFE (late and post-secondary Colleges of Technical and Further Education). When children were in primary school, it was usually parents who made the decision to withdraw students and all except one student thought this had been done in their best interests. Several students explained that they had been unsure about leaving school but they had come to appreciate being at home and nine students were relieved to be studying at home. The one student who expressed his deep discontent with having been withdrawn from primary school lived on an isolated farm property and disliked the purchased curriculum which, as a young teen, he found too easy and overly repetitive. Three of these students were sufficiently independent to make the decision to attend school in opposition to clearly expressed parental wishes, although these parents supported their children in school once they had made their decision. Typical reasons given for choosing to attend conventional schools and institutions included the need for specialist instruction and/or social needs. Those who attended TAFE chose to do so because of particular learning goals.

4.5. Self regulation as experienced in conventional school

Several secondary aged students only mentioned the opportunities, or lack thereof, to make personal decisions in conventional school.

One student was pleasantly surprised that the teacher gave the class a choice of texts to study in English, while a second student was pleased to have a greater choice of subjects than he had experienced at home. A third student noted she seemed to be freer from peer pressure than her conventionally schooled peers. In contrast, two students missed being able to set their own times and pace of learning once in conventional schools. Overall, students were mostly silent about their ability to exercise any form of self-regulation once in conventional schools and institutions.

4.6. Structure in conventional schools

Older students in particular were aware that their freedom and self-regulation reflected different degrees of what they termed “structure” experienced at home and in conventional schools. This was expressed as an appreciation for less structure while at home and recognition of a variety of structures, some positive but mostly negative, experienced in conventional schools.

4.6.1. At home

If I was interested in something, I’d just be able to check it out and find out about it without having to ... go through all the processes that you might have to find out if you wanted to do something in school. (Dana-19) (Jackson, 2009, p. 190)

Five older students who were either academically strong or who had learning difficulties appreciated the lack of structure at home compared to their experiences in conventional schools. They believed that this lack of structure at home allowed them more efficient, effective and meaningful learning experiences.

4.6.2. Conventional school

The positives:

Just the way it was all ... structured. (Duane-21)

Just enjoyed the change ... I liked the classroom kind of set-up. (Fifi-17) (Jackson, 2009, p. 191)

Ten secondary school-aged or older students valued the regularities and structures of conventional schools and institutions. Positive structures included the change in the learning environments, classroom set-up, regularity of roll-mark, classroom and subject organisation and the pressure to perform. All students appreciated breaks during the day, while a number of students valued the extracurricular activities including athletic days, sports, school bands and fun days organised by teachers.

Students at TAFE found many of the TAFE style structures compatible with their home learning experiences. These features included small class sizes, relevant courses often grounded in real-life contexts reflecting student interests, although one student was disappointed there were fewer “hands on” learning opportunities. TAFEs also provided for flexible time management and adult appropriate learning opportunities and outcomes.

The negatives:

Structured vs. unstructured. Would be the words. (Jarratt-21)

Bloomin’ homework! (Stuart-13) (Jackson, 2009, pp. 192-193)

Conventional schools had general structures students found inhibiting, but they also identified specific structures. Because these students were used to running their own time schedules at home, they particularly noticed the set timetables and schedules of conventional schools. At home these students could do work promptly and make the most of the extra time. In conventional schools,

prompt work meant one then had to sit for boring periods of time resulting in little incentive to be efficient about time management. Travel time between home and schools and set homework were often viewed as an additional time waster and restraint on personal time management.

When entering conventional schools and institutions these students were frequently challenged by the behavioural expectations and regulated activities, particularly if their teachers failed to provide adequate explanations. This dilemma was evident in such things as involvement in team sports, homework requirements, general classroom behaviour and discipline including chatting in class once work was completed and routine expectations such as wearing correct uniform. To them, requirements restricting conversation were significant because conversation at home was an essential part of their learning process (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Jackson, 2015; Thomas, 1998).

Overall, hindrances to self-regulation created by the structures of conventional schools and institutions as identified by these students included the age and ability divided classrooms which limited their social connections, restrictions to student choice of subjects, activities, involvement in personal interests, various limitations to self-expression and personal time wasting through home work, “busy work” and other classroom management strategies.

4.7. Cultural differences between home and conventional school

To better understand the reasons for the different opportunities and experiences for students’ self-regulation it is important to look at the cultural differences between home education and conventional schools.

4.7.1. At home

While every home educating family is a unique unit, Australian research has consistently shown that home educators use three general types of curriculum styles (Jackson, 2015; Thomas, 1998). These include: (1) school-like curriculums, frequently purchased from educational providers, (2) eclectic programs using some school-like curriculum features, but generally tailored around student abilities, needs and interests and (3) informal programmes established with, and by, students based on their interests, abilities and needs. In Jackson’s (2009) research, students using both eclectic and informal programmes highly valued their ability to engage in many opportunities for self-regulation, while students using more school-like programmes expressed greater dissatisfaction with their home education experience, particularly their restricted ability to engage in self-determination of the content of learning material. Another consistent finding was that, over time, families generally moved from more structured curriculum approaches to less structured ones as a direct response to student needs, abilities and interests (Croft, 2013; Jackson, 2009; Office of the Board of Studies (OBOS), NSW, 2000; Reilly, 2004; Thomas, 1998).

The most common cultural feature of home education has been family recognition that each child is unique and programmes require individual tailoring. Students engaged in all three curriculum types were able to make decisions about the timing, location and environment for learning while also contributing to decisions about curriculum to varying degrees. Families regularly connected with their local communities and used a wide range of community resources including local libraries, museums, knowledgeable community members, sporting clubs and centres, musical groups and activities, hobby and other neighbourhood groups as well as local home education networks.

Other, not quite so obvious, cultural features of home education were also evident. While parents were generally aware of their children’s activities and whereabouts, they did not maintain a strict visual surveillance or monitor children as a matter of trust and practicality. Most students were keen to learn and pursue learning interests as evident in the time-consuming interest-based learning projects that could sometimes continue for months. Projects included such activities as novel writing, scientific experiments or detailed hobbies and art pursuits. Students valued personal and meaningful social connection with friends across a wide age range based on common interests and lack of peer pressure. Frequent quiet personal time was also valued. They felt they were better prepared

with general life skills and that they had a better understanding of their communities than their conventionally schooled peers. A subtle cultural aspect of home education was the high level of self-esteem students experienced at home and which was more about their state of being than a measurable quantity (Jackson, 2009).

4.7.2. *In school*

In conventional schools there was written and verbal recognition that each child was unique and needed personalised learning programmes, however, delivering this type of approach was restricted by the structures of conventional schools. These structures included state and national curriculum requirements, standardised testing, hierarchical professional-student roles, classroom layout, set regular daily activities including timetables and fixed break times, age and ability groupings, playgrounds with minimal features, contrived social opportunities restricted to same aged peers and peer pressure influences, constant visual supervision and monitoring and homework. All of these features impinged on personal time and space whether at school or at home and restricted opportunities to engage in self-direction and self-regulation. In addition, a number of students felt their self-esteem was challenged when they entered conventional schools.

5. Student views and experiences of cultural differences between home and conventional schooling

When these students entered conventional schools, they lost many of the freedoms experienced at home. Although most adjusted quickly to the new environment, they did not always see the relevance or value of many of the restrictions imposed. While at home, students were able to create a personalised and comfortable learning environment, set their own times for learning and decide what, when, how and why they learnt. In schools many students enjoyed some aspects of their new learning environment, particularly the contact with subject experts, classroom discussions and, for those who struggled with procrastination at home, set time frames for work. In spite of this, all students claimed they learnt more at home than they did at school. Although opportunities for socialisation has been the most frequent question thrown at home educators these students explained that, although they may have fewer friends at home, these friends were more likely to share common interests and usually came from a wide age range of people. There was an element of choice in their home social connections. They noted that school friendships were usually limited to same aged peers and often with similar ability, a situation these students found artificial and far from ideal.

Interestingly, teachers and other educational professionals observed that these students appeared to be both resilient and vulnerable at the same time, presented as independent learners who were keen to learn and be involved while also being apparently unaware of classroom culture and others. These educators also noted these students appeared to enjoy talking to adults but may not be quite so comfortable with school peers although many students were considered to be academically and socially advanced (Jackson, 2009, 2010).

6. Discussion

6.1. Continuities and discontinuities between home education and conventional schooling

Both home education and conventional schools are engaged in educational work supporting learning and cognitive development with the goal of enabling students to enter life as self-regulating and involved citizens with meaningful careers and a love of lifelong learning. The mechanisms to achieve these educational aims include basic skills such as reading, writing, numeracy and research.

In spite of the similar goals, these students have illustrated how home education and conventional schools use very different practices to achieve these goals. From their observations and an understanding of the different educational cultures involved, we are able to identify why so much of home education works and why it supports students' ability to exercise self-determination and

self-regulation. We can also better understand how and why the culture of conventional schools does not achieve these same outcomes to the same extent.

Much of the learning at home connected student interests and needs to real-life contexts, making the learning relevant and applicable to life situations. In schools, learning, especially within set subject areas, was usually disconnected from real life, unrelated to personal interests and life worlds because it was arbitrarily segmented into set and separated subject areas often determined by distant government agencies. Learning at home was frequently “hands on”, individualised, and provided in a relationally supportive and emotionally secure environment, while the learning at school was teacher directed to large groups of students with varied learning abilities. Opportunities for mediated learning in the home were frequent and immediate because parents tended to work alongside students, more as colleagues than experts, unlike the situation in conventional schools (Jackson, 2015; Thomas & Pattison, 2013). Student opportunities to engage in self-regulation at home were daily and deeply meaningful and yet, in conventional schools, opportunities for self-regulation were rare. Assessment of work at home was immediate, personal and reflective of the students’ abilities, while in conventional schools, assessment was usually made according to group abilities and national assessments. Social opportunities at home included strong family connectedness, deep personal and interest-based friendships within vertically aged social opportunities regardless of age and gender and where there was respect for individual preferences. In conventional schools, social opportunities were usually restricted to same aged peers through horizontal peer socialisation which tended to emphasise peer dependence, discourage a lot of meaningful connection with adults and where family connection was both weaker and sometimes challenged. Students described how their self-esteem was higher and more about who they were as unique individuals at home in contrast to their experiences in conventional schools where their self-esteem was often challenged and determined by their position in a class, academically and socially.

It is easy to forget that educational professionals are seen by society as having legitimate power and that this very legitimacy of power contributes to the lack of opportunity for students to develop self-regulation through experience in most conventional schools and institutions. These home educated students, who had experienced a different educational culture, identified the professional and institutional practices that inhibited self-regulation. They also described how these professional and institutional practices back-grounded the peer victimisation that some had experienced and from which they had only found relief once they left conventional schooling (Jackson, 2009).

Professionals in the larger research project involving these students and, to a lesser extent their parents, were unaware of the autonomy and self-regulation exercised by these students about anything, especially student involvement in the decision to attend or leave conventional schools (Jackson, 2009, 2010). Although these students knowingly accepted the structures and restrictions to their autonomy in conventional schools, their life experiences had provided them with the experienced knowledge that their decisions were deep, meaningful and effective, regardless of where and how they chose to pursue their education.

6.2. Historical sociocultural lens on home educated student self-regulation

Historical sociocultural theory fully recognises that culture is an integral part of human development (Stetsenko, 2013; Vygotsky, 1987). The two different educational cultures of home education and conventional schools clearly illustrate these differences and their different impact on students.

The cultural differences between the educational environments these students experienced at home and in conventional schools can be summed up as personal, inclusive, warm, supportive, communal and non-hierarchical at home vs. the individualistic, exclusive, impersonal, graded and hierarchical environments of conventional schools. Student ability to develop and exercise self-regulation was directly related to these two very different cultural educational environments. The opportunity to be agentic was a life skill students valued and they recognised this as the most important outcome of their educational pathways. It was the intention of Vygotsky and others that historical

sociocultural theory would explain how to increase individuals' abilities to be fully engaged self-regulating and transformative community members (Bruner, 2004; Stetsenko, 2013).

One question arose from this research. A number of the early primary school aged boys who had either learning difficulties or, more particularly, had been professionally assessed as advanced learners expressed significant anger about the limitations and restrictions created by the structures of conventional schools. This anger disappeared and was replaced by relief once these boys started home education. I suggest that the development of self-regulation may be masked and inhibited by the very nature and structures of early year conventional schooling but made evident through the practice of home education.

7. Recommendations

According to historical sociocultural theory, humans learn through experience and interaction in their cultural and social environments. For students to learn how to exercise transformative agency (Sannino, 2015; Stetsenko, 2013), it is important they be given opportunities to develop this skill. It is evident that the culture of home education encourages the development of these agentic skills, while the culture of much of conventional education inhibits this development. Although the very structures of conventional schools make it difficult to provide these agentic opportunities, there are some schools working towards this achievement (see Templestowe College in Victoria, Jacks, 2016; Preiss, 2014) and this also appears evident in the Finnish school system (Fanning & McCullagh, 2016) where their educational practices are far broader than just providing highly professional educators. Some aspects of home education can be introduced more deliberately on a smaller scale in conventional schools and could include greater flexibility of class time, opportunities to select topics of personal interest and greater respect for student personal time. Conventional schools could broaden their horizons by taking note of what works so well in home education to encourage transformational agency.

8. Conclusion

Although conventional schools have broad community and societal power and authority to educate students to become self-regulating and agentic community members, their very cultural artefacts and structures limit the opportunities for students to actively engage in authentic agentic decision-making and self-regulation. Home education, on the other hand, as a less broadly accepted educational option is often misunderstood and challenged by society and governments (Allan & Jackson, 2010), but provides a safe cultural environment that enables and empowers students to learn, through experience and opportunity, those self-regulating and agentic skills valued in democratic societies. Conventional education can learn from home educators how to better incorporate learning opportunities and environments that encourage and develop authentic student self-regulation and agentic life skills.

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