

USE YOUR FREEDOM OF CHOICE: REASONS FOR CHOOSING HOMESCHOOL IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

In Australia, the decision to home educate is becoming increasingly popular (cf. Harding & Farrell, 2003; Townsend, 2012). In spite of its increasing popularity, the reasons home education is chosen by Australian families is under-researched (cf. Jackson & Allan, 2010). This paper reports on a case study that set out to explore the links between families that unschool and the parenting philosophies they follow. In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with a group of home education families in one of Australia's most populated cities. Data were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis. The analysis revealed that there were links between the parents' beliefs about home education and their adherence to Attachment Parenting.

Introduction:

This paper reports on early data collected in a study of home-education families in Australia. Building on the work of Anthony and Burroughs (2012) and others (cf. Anthony & Burroughs, 2010; Cooper, 2012; Allan & Jackson, 2011; Rowntree, 2012), it aims to contribute to the corpus that explains “why . . . some people in our society choose to educate their children differently than the majority” (Anthony &

Burroughs, 2012, p. 3). The research that currently exists into home-education generally focuses on North American families' experiences of choice (cf. de Waal & Theron, 2003; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Gaither, 2009). However, a significant body of research also examines the social experiences of homeschoolers (cf. Winstanley, 2009; Kraftl, 2012; Jolly, Matthews & Nester, 2012), as well as their academic achievements (cf. S Martin-Chang & Gould, 2011; Bagwell, 2010). Some work exists on curriculum design and the use of syllabi in home-education families (cf. Anthony & Burroughs, 2012), however, in the main, the research has been limited to the decisions and experiences of North American home-education families.

The study reported in this paper examines the choices of home-education among a group of families who identify as Attachment Parents. In this study, home-education has been defined, in line with Harding and Farrell (2003, p. 125) as “the education of children within the home setting . . . overseen by parents or other adults, significant to the child and family.” Thus, the paper takes two approaches, first, it examines the way that home-education fits into an Attachment Parenting approach. The second area is the experiences of parents in choosing to home-education among a group of parents who are connected to one home education group in Australia.

Review of literature:

As noted above, in the USA, the decision to home educate children has been researched extensively. In several studies, it is argued that the choice to home educate is increasingly popular among parents who identify as following a range of different parenting philosophies (cf. Collom, 2005; Cooper & Sureau, 2007; Hurlbutt, 2011). However, in spite of its increasing popularity, in the USA as in Australia and the UK, there is limited literature on the home education movement (Green & Hoovey-

Dempsey, 2007; Jackson & Allan, 2010). In addition, stereotypes remain. As Morton (2012) notes, perceptions about home education families range from “social 'misfits': either 'tree-hugging hippies', religious fanatics or 'hothousing' parents determined that their offspring should achieve academic excellence at an early age” (Morton, 2012, pp. 45-46).

There has never been a more pressing need to examine home education movement in Australia. It has been noted that the movement is growing among Australian families (cf. Harding & Farrell, 2003; Varnham, 2008; Jackson & Allan, 2010), with media reports of the growing numbers of families, beyond the Christian right and those in rural and remote communities who are perceived to be the traditional group of home educators in Australia (cf. Townsend, 2012). While, as Jackson and Allan (2010) argue, home education is a “legally accepted pathway that satisfies compulsory education requirements in all states and territories of Australia” (p. 350), there is some difficulty knowing how many families home-educate because many families choose not to follow the legal route and do not register with the state or territory home-education branch of the education department (cf. Harding & Farrell, 2003; Jackson, 2008).

The numbers that fail to register with home education authorities suggests that, as some research argues (cf. Harding & Farrell, 2003), parents choose to home educate for philosophical reasons. Recent media attention that has focused on home education has been concerned with the numbers of unregistered home education families. In one report, the numbers were reported as around 15,000 in Queensland, the third most populous state in Australia (cf. Townsend, 2012). In the 2012 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census, the data is difficult to decipher with approximately 184,000 children not being represented by the statistics of students in

school during the compulsory school years (taken as between the ages of six and 15) (ABS, 2012). In addition, the review of education that was recently conducted in Australia focused on the differences in funding and outcomes of private and public education, however it did not consider the experiences of the growing number of families choosing to home-educate (cf. English, 2012). Failure to consider home education in the Gonski review of education (cf. Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, Scales & Tannock, 2011) seems remiss as Aurini and Davies (2005) argue, the choice of home education is growing in legitimacy and popularity in line with other forms of private education in Australia.

The literature examining the experiences of families within the Australian home-education movement is even more limited with several PhD studies (cf. Harding, 2011) and some research papers (cf. Harding & Farrell, 2003; Varnham, 2008; Jackson & Allan, 2010). The research that reports on the motivations of parents who home educate, argue that they are generally philosophical. Harding and Farrell (2003) and Harding (2006) argue that home educating families choose this pathway for a number of reasons. Varnham (2008) cites Harding (2006) to argue that the reasons people home educate include religious belief; parental responsibility; concerns over quality of teaching, especially around literacy and numeracy; social development; avoidance of bullying and other negative peer experiences; distance and special needs. Harding (2006) classified these as decisions based on philosophy and this is often cited as the main reason parents choose to home educate their children in Australia as in other countries (cf. Van Galen, 1987; Collom, 2005; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Cooper & Sureau, 2007).

Still, research remains limited and while the movement has been criticised for many of the same reasons as other private education choices (cf. Apple, 2000;

Lubienski, 2000; Reich, 2002; Anthony & Burroughs, 2012), its increasing popularity in Australia warrants further study. In particular, the decision of a new, growing population of home-educators. These parents would traditionally have chosen a private school for their children, however, it is proposed that, due to their parenting philosophies and beliefs, home-education is now their first choice. Many of these new parents identify as *Attachment Parents*.

It is useful at this point to define how this paper is using the term *Attachment Parenting*. Attachment Parenting is “based on caregiving features such as infant-cue and extended breastfeeding, child-led weaning, cosleeping and carrying infants in slings or body carriers” (Green & Groves, 2008, p. 514). There are many popular sources of literature on Attachment Parenting including the Sears’ books (cf. Sears & Sears; 2001), magazines such as *The Compleat Mother* (USA), *Mothering* (USA) and *The Natural Parent Magazine* (Australia and New Zealand); forums on Yahoo groups, Meetups and Facebook provide a connection point between parents who identify as Attachment Parents. Websites such as *The Natural Child Project* (USA) and *Attachment Parenting International* (USA) are blog style publications that offer research based information for parents.

Methodology:

The study sought to fill a gap around parenting philosophies and their role in home education choice. The data reported in this paper is part of a wider study into home education choice in Queensland. The group of mothers, as home education is principally mothers’ work (cf. Lois, 2010) who were interviewed were all members of a home-education group located in a coastal community. The parents were living in the suburbs of a beach-side area as well as in the hinterland behind the beach. They

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were following an Attachment Parenting approach, however not all have used this term. In addition, all of the parents were unschooling their children or following a child-led, natural learning approach.

Data was collected using in-depth, qualitative interviews. There were approximately 30 questions grouped into five categories:

The parents' experiences of education.

The demographics of the children.

The children's experiences of education (for example, whether they had ever gone to school).

The family's experiences of home-education.

The expectations of the family regarding home-education (including whether they were expecting to go to school at some stage and their future goals for tertiary study, if any).

The specific interview technique used to gather data was flexibly structured interviews. This type of interview seeks "in-depth understandings about the experiences of individuals" (Scott & Morrison, 2006, p. 134). The technique was chosen because it allowed Aishah to reflect and describe her experiences in-depth during a conversation which was loosely guided by questions. The resulting account was a co-construction of meaning between the participant and the interviewer (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Scott & Morrison, 2006; Fontana & Frey, 2008). The interview was open-ended and Aishah was asked to speak broadly about her perspectives on her decision to home educate her children (Scott & Morrison, 2006; Yardley & Bishop, 2008). While the participants have been given names, these names

are pseudonyms, chosen by the interviewees at the time of the interview. It is noted that the women chose their own pseudonym, to assure them that data would be deidentified and so that they would be able to find themselves, and their responses, in the research data.

Data Analysis:

Data were analysed using the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach allows researchers to “work with different approaches, multimethodically, and on the basis of a variety of empirical data as well as background information” (Wodak, 2001, p. 65). Wodak (2004) argues that the DHA allows for an analysis of the influence of wider social processes, relations and structures on the construction of discourses. While all approaches to CDA incorporate an analysis of the historical circumstances of discourse practices (cf. Fairclough, 2001b; Wodak, 2001; 2002; Rogers, 2004; Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui & O’Garro Joseph, 2005; Rogers & Mosley, 2008; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009), the DHA allows for a thorough analysis of how discourses contribute to the construction of identity discourses (cf. de Cillia, Reisigl & Wodak, 1999).

The analysis focused on the *argumentation strategy tool* (cf. Wodak, 2004). The argumentation strategy tool allows for an analysis of the arguments that a speaker frames in their accounts (Wodak, 2004; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Argumentation strategies are useful in identifying the “set of processes which operate consciously or unconsciously at different levels of communication” (Titscher, Myer, Wodak & Vetter, 2000, p. 158).

The tool analyses five strategies of argumentation. The first is *referential/nomination* that involves membership categorisation and the construction

of in and out groups (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). The second is *predication*.

Predication is evident in the attributions and stereotypes a social actor uses to label and evaluate others. The third strategy is *argumentation*, in which a social actor describes the positive and negative attributes they identify with another group. The fourth strategy is *perspectivisation*, which sees the speaker invoke ideological perspectives to position their point of view (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). The fifth and final strategy is *intensification and mitigation*, which sees the speaker mitigate or intensify the status of the other (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009).

Researcher's Background:

It is important to note the researcher's background as it may impact on the analysis of data. The researcher was educated in a private, elite, all-girls' Catholic School in the capital city nearby to the coastal community. The researcher then went to university and graduated as a teacher, teaching in both public and private schools for seven years before beginning a career in teacher education. The researcher is also a writer for several Attachment Parenting magazines and has a home education theory blog. Her background may have been problematic in the sense that the participants may have felt that the researcher was 'one of them' and thus tried to be accommodating in their responses. In addition, it may affect the trustworthiness of the findings as the participants may have been particularly careful to emphasize their Attachment Parenting credentials (as many did explicitly mention their adherence to Attachment Parenting philosophies by listing off many of the eight principles of parenting that are identified on Attachment Parenting International's information page (cf. API, 2008 <http://www.attachmentparenting.org/principles/intro.php>).

Sample:

The two mothers whose responses are reported here were all members of the same home education group. As noted above, they were all located in the coastal area, and all three families lived in the beachside community. They all identified as Attachment Parents and listed aspects of this lifestyle as significant to them. For example, all three parents mentioned that they had chosen baby-wearing, extended breastfeeding, co-sleeping and limited separations during infancy and early childhood as part of their parenting approach. In addition, all three were unschooling their children or following a natural learning approach. Each of the parents noted that this was central to their beliefs about home education and they each stated explicitly that this was the approach they had chosen to take.

The first mother is Joan. She was a married, stay-at-home mother to four children, Aamon, Emily, Mason and Jade. Both of the older children were registered with the home-education authority section of the state education department. The younger two were not registered because they were not of compulsory school age. The second is Jennifer. Jennifer was a married, stay at home mother to a daughter, Violet. Jennifer had qualified as a teacher and spent two years teaching overseas. Violet was Jennifer's second child, the first and only of her current marriage. Jennifer had a son named Damien who was studying at a prestigious university. He had experienced a number of problems with schools, his mother described him as *twice exceptional*, and he was finally asked to leave a school at which Jennifer was teaching. At this point, she decided that she too would leave the school and she began unschooling her son. Violet was also unschooled after her initial decision to go to kindergarten.

Data:

Three extracts of data will be analysed for this paper. Each of these three extracts were from the interviews with the three parents. Each one concerns the relationship between the family's focus on Attachment Parenting and the decision to home educate. The first extract is from Joan, the second is from Jennifer and the third is from Padmé.

Extract one: Joan

Joan: I know of some home schoolers who are very rigid and not Attachment Parenting at all.

Researcher: So would you consider yourself to be Attachment Parenting your family?

Joan: Yeah, this one still sleeps with us and they pretty much all did until much later when we did the whole sling wearing. We don't do corporal punishment and we do a lot of communication . . . that ties in with our natural learning . . . definitely there's a definite link between home schooling in a natural learning environment with Attachment Parenting.

Extract two: Jennifer

Jennifer: I just remember the anxiety, real anxiety and I'm actually adopted so I've come to the whole Attachment Parenting through my experience of being adopted and having anxiety and just being separated from my mum so that was Primary School. No, not good memories at all . . . I believe in all that so why would I want to leave her at school with strangers when she didn't want to go to school anyway and she was very clingy to me for a long time until she was about three or even not sleeping through the night and all of that stuff. I hate controlled crying with a passion and [Violet] would sleep in with us . . . That's all part of it. That whole Attachment Parenting is really part of it as far as home schooling.

Analysis:

Several argumentation strategies are seen in the extracts above. Working through the Argumentation Strategy Tool (Wodak, 2004), there is evidence of all of the strategies of argumentation in these extracts.

Referential/nomination was seen in several extracts. Referential/nomination constructs membership of a group, for example, Joan describes how some home educators are Attachment Parents and some are not. She states, *some home schoolers who are very rigid and not Attachment Parenting at all* while contrasting that with her own family's experience of home education stating that, in her family, *there's a definite link between home schooling in a natural learning environment with Attachment Parenting*. Similarly, Jennifer contrasted her own parenting style, which she states is Attachment Parenting, with the parenting styles of other parents. For example, she listed controlled crying, *I hate controlled crying with a passion* as a part of a parenting style that contrasted with her own approach to Violet who *would sleep in with us* for a number of years.

Predication was also evident in the transcripts. This strategy involves the labels that are used to name another group. While none of the three transcripts used names to label parents who were not attachment focused, they did use labels to identify themselves as following Attachment Parenting. For example, Joan described herself as following several of the eight principles of parenting (API, 2008) including using nurturing touch through *the whole sling wearing*, ensuring safe sleep physically and emotionally as her youngest *still sleeps with us* and the practice of positive discipline because *we don't do corporal punishment and we do a lot of communication*. Similarly, Jennifer also noted that she had practiced the safe sleep tenant of Attachment Parenting in her family.

Perspectivisation was also evident in the accounts. For example, Jennifer noted that the decision to home educate was deeply rooted in her Attachment Parenting beliefs. She invoked what Reisigl and Wodak (2009) term ideological perspectives, to connect her decision to home educate with her belief in Attachment Parenting. She

stated that *I believe in [Attachment Parenting] so why would I want to leave her at school with strangers when she didn't want to go to school anyway*. She invoked her belief that Attachment Parenting was the way to parent as the reason she was home educating *that whole Attachment Parenting is really part of it as far as home schooling*. Her transcript appears to argue that there was no alternative for her but to home educate because it was the only way that she could connect her beliefs in Attachment Parenting with her children's need for a quality education.

Intensification and mitigation were also evident in the transcripts. This strategy sees the speaker mitigate or intensify the status of the other (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). Specifically, the strategy of deontic intensification, which involves the construction of moral fallacies of a particular policy (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009), was seen in the transcripts. All three participants noted that, any other choice than to home educate, would have been inconsistent with their parenting philosophies and thus their beliefs on how best to meet the individual needs of their children. Their decision to home educate, as each of the participants noted, was part of their focus on developing a strong attachment bond that met the needs of their children. The deontic intensification established the moral fallacy of choosing any other educational option for them.

Findings:

The argumentation strategy, evident in the three transcripts, suggested that there was a link between the mothers' identification with Attachment Parenting and their decision to home educate. In particular, the following of an Attachment Parenting philosophy and the choice of unschooling were deeply enmeshed. The strategies of

argumentation established a link between the decision to unschool and the mothers' beliefs about what was the best way to raise children.

Titscher et al. (2000) state that argumentation strategies establish the “set of processes which operate consciously or unconsciously at different levels of communication” (p. 158). At the most obvious level of communication, these mothers were able to articulate a link between their decision to home educate and their Attachment Parenting approach to their children. However, the argumentation strategies chosen also suggest that, for these parents, home education was central to a continuum of practices that were used to establish a strong connection and bond between themselves and their children. It may be that these mothers were responding to, not only the failure to establish a deep bond of attachment to their own mothers, but also to failings in their own educations. Each of the participants noted that they had not struggled with school, per se, but they had struggled to see the purpose and benefit of school. In addition, their experiences of schooling were of being in a dictatorial, autocratic environment that was at odds with their beliefs about how children should be raised. As Attachment Parenting International (2008) states, “Instilling fear in children serves no purpose and creates feelings of shame and humiliation . . . controlling or manipulative discipline compromises the trust between parent and child, and harms the attachment bond.” It may be that these parents were attempting to use their home education choice to further establish the bonds between them and their children. Perhaps, as is noted by Attachment Parenting International, the decision to home educate was a response to the shame, humiliation and fear they had experienced at school which had harmed the bond between these mothers and their parents. Jennifer's transcript best illustrates this sense of the harm her parents' decision to send her to school had done to her attachment to them. For example,

Jennifer stated that *I just remember the anxiety, real anxiety. . . I've come to the whole Attachment Parenting through my experience of being adopted and having anxiety and just being separated from my mum so that was Primary School.* There is clearly a link in this transcript between the following of Attachment Parenting philosophies and the decision to home educate following an unschool model.

Discussion:

Further work needs to be undertaken to examine the decision to home education and its relationship to parenting philosophies. The three transcripts that have been reported here suggest that the reason parents home educate is deeply rooted in their beliefs about parenting. The participants had all followed an Attachment Parenting approach and their decision to home educate had followed from that approach. Further research may reveal whether, in parents who do not identify as Attachment Parents, there is a similarity between their decision to home educate, particularly following an unschooling or natural learning approach and an Attachment Parenting style.

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