Deschooling and unschooling after experiences of bullying: Five parents tell their stories

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the reports of parents who are unschooling because of the bullying their children experienced in mainstream Australian schools. Extant home education research that considers bullying tends to see it as part of a suite of negative experiences that lead to home education. These studies rarely take as their starting point the primary role of bullying in the decision to home educate. This paper examines the reports of parents who identify peer bullying as the main reason they home educate. It analyses the narratives of families who reported that not only was bullying at school the primary driver to home school but that unschooling was a means of healing from the school-based trauma due to bullying. Data are drawn from qualitative interviews with six Australian parents who were home educating because of bullying, five of whom self-identified as relaxed homeschoolers/child-led homeschoolers/unschoolers. We note how these approaches were identified as a means of healing from the trauma of bullying which, in several cases, led to serious and severe psychological outcomes. Our study supports the findings of previous research that suggest that a relaxed approach to home education can be an important means of healing after serious school trauma for students.

Keywords: Home education, bullying, deschooling, unschooling

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Home education is one of the fastest growing educational choices in Australia (Moir & English, 2022). For most Australian families, it is not their first choice. After initially deciding to trial Distance Education or school at home approaches, families tend to become more relaxed over the time they are home educating. Despite Australia's tough regulatory climate in most states and territories (see Select Committee on Home Schooling, 2014), and legislative changes designed to make unschooling harder (English, 2019), more families are unschooling in Australia. As literature has suggested (e.g., Michaud, 2019; Ricci et al., 2021; Riley, 2020), unschooling can be an antidote to a series of traumatic experiences in school. It is in this space that we are locating our research work.

In this paper, we examine how parents use unschooling to restore and reset after bullying led to their children's withdrawal from school. We were particularly concerned with parents' reports which suggest the experience of bullying affected the type of home education they were following. However, unlike most work in the field, we did not take the decision to unschool as our starting point. Rather, our starting point was parents' discourses about their children's experience of bullying leading to home education and, from that, our research revealed how the choice to unschool, or be a relaxed home educator, was born from their experiences of the bullying.

Bullying in the literature

It is important to begin this paper by defining what we mean by bullying. Since research into peer or school bullying was undertaken in the 1970's by Dan Olweus there has been controversy about the definition of the term. While most researchers have agreed on Olweus' three components of bullying behaviour: (1) the intention to hurt; (2) the usually repetitive nature of the behaviour; and (3) the imbalance of power (Gladden et al., 2014),

there has been some disagreement. Smith and Slonje's (2010) definition is often taken as a succinct way of expressing what bullying means to researchers: "an aggressive, intentional act or behaviour that is carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (p. 147). Forms of bullying were categorised into physical bullying, verbal bullying and social/exclusion bullying. However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with the rise in the adoption of technology, aggression through technology appeared in the extant research (Campbell, 2005). What this behaviour was to be called was debated. Some researchers called it cyberaggression, cyberfighting, e-bullying, or bullying by technology (Bauman et al., 2013). However, the word cyberbullying was the most often used (Campbell & Bauman, 2018). Controversy also surrounded the definition of this word (Dooley et al., 2009) with some researchers saying cyberbullying was not bullying, while others claimed that the behaviour met Olweus' three components. This controversy has somewhat abated with UNESCO (2021) agreeing with Olweus' definition and that there are now four forms of bullying.

The word "bullying" seems to have morphed in the public domain to include any kind of nasty behaviour or even use of legitimate power. Without an agreed definition of the word bullying, it is difficult for schools to deal with the behaviour. Most schools, especially in Australia, have adopted a definition which has incorporated Olweus' three components in their anti-bullying policies. A problem that often occurs however, is that teachers and parents do not always think of bullying in these terms. Compton et al. (2014) found that while teachers believed that students who bullied others intended to harm them, parents of the child labelled as a bully thought their child did not intend to hurt others. In a study by Ey and Campbell (2021) early childhood teachers did not mention intention nor power imbalance, only repetition and could not articulate the difference between fighting and bullying. These points are significant because, as several of our participants noted, Olweus' definition of

bullying informed their correspondence with the teachers, principals, school counsellors or the departments of education when they were trying to fix the problem before withdrawing their children. It is further noted that we began all interviews by explaining to participants our study was following Olweus' definition.

Home education research and bullying

In this paper we are defining home education as the education of the child outside of a formal institutional setting, such as a school (English & Gribble, 2021). We deliberately avoid the term homeschooling because it implies that home education is principally practised in a school-like way that mirrors the strictures of classrooms. We acknowledge there are myriad ways to home educate, usually described as a spectrum from highly structured (school at home) to highly unstructured (eclectic and unschooling). This paper also acknowledges the accidental (English, 2021a; 2021b) nature of the Australian home education landscape whereby most families in Australia have some experience of schooling before deciding to home educate. All parents in this study were "accidentals."' because they identified school-based bullying as the reason they had decided to home educate.

There is some international research that suggests bullying may contribute to the decision to home educate (e.g., Castillo, 2017; Hartman & Huttunen, 2021; Petrie, 2001; Puga, 2021; Rothermel, 2011; Slater et al., 2020). However, with this work, bullying is one of a suite of issues a child may face in schools. In reviewing literature from the past three decades, it was evident that citations of bullying as a reason for home educating are increasing, with four articles from the 1990s, 15 from the 2000s, 26 from the 2010s, and 10 just from the last two years of this decade. Most of the studies do not define (or explicitly state any definition of) bullying, instead, these studies relied on participants' perceptions.

The parents in several studies indicated that they home educated to provide relief and healing for the child after bullying (e.g., D'Arcy, 2014; Morton, 2010). Parents felt their role was to nurture, protect, and remedy the effects of bullying (Harding, 2011). Although parents often notice positive outcomes "within a few days" of removing the child from school and commencing home education (Harding, 2011, p. 178), some situations require more long-term healing and intervention (e.g., Bower, 2019; Gribble & English, 2016; Michaud, 2019; Ricci et al., 2021). It is significant that in these studies, approaches to education needed to be individualised, flexible, and relaxed, and often included elements usually associated with unschooling such as autonomy, self-direction, and "learning as [they] live" (Gray & Riley, 2013, p. 8). It is in this space that we locate our research. We define unschooling in line with Gray and Riley (2013) as young people "learn[ing] primarily through everyday life experiences—that they choose and that therefore automatically match their abilities, interests, and learning styles" (p.2). Significantly in our study, the families described themselves as unschoolers, child led, eclectic, or relaxed which Riley (2020) defined as a branch of the unschooling literature.

Method

Our data is drawn from interviews with parents who had withdrawn their children from schools due to bullying. We interviewed a total of six parents. The only criterion for participation was that parents had decided to home educate because their child was bullied in school/s. We did not specify what age the child should be, who the bully was (same grade, different grade, same class etc), how many schools they had to have tried first or what school type they had to have come from.

All the parents (n=6) had originally chosen state schooling. Most Australian students attend state schools (ABS, 2021). One third of the parents (n=2) had tried multiple state schools; both participants had moved between states to enable their child to move to a

different school and break the cycle of bullying. In both cases, they had decided to home educate, but had moved back to their original state to do that. One parent had tried to escape the bullying by sending her child to a private (Evangelical Christian) school, but this had not worked out either, so their child was also home educating. The problems appeared to be an issue with the theological basis of the school more so than bullying at that second, private school. As such, half our participants had tried to remedy the bullying within the schooling system.

The current study was approved by Queensland University of Technology's ethical clearance process. Approval was given in early 2022, approval code 5312, and parents were contacted soon after. Parents were invited to participate through a call to be interviewed on several Facebook groups where home educators are known to gather. We also advertised in the Home Education Association email newsletter. The parents we spoke with were predominantly from New South Wales (n=4), Australia's most populous state. The remaining families were from Queensland (n=2), Australia's third most populous state. Two of the researchers live in Queensland and the third lives in New South Wales which may explain the geographical location of our participants.

Interviews were informal and very conversational. Parents were invited to choose a pseudonym and the interviewer referred to them by their pseudonym. Child/ren's names were removed during transcription in addition to the school's/s' names. Participants were offered a copy of their transcript to check after their interview. The pseudonym is used here to report the findings.

Findings

This section of the paper reports the findings of the qualitative interviews. All participants reported they had begun home educating by attempting to replicate school at home, then they undertook some form of de-schooling to learn how to successfully home

educate without trying to replicate a school like structure. Five of the participants reported they were following a relaxed, eclectic or unschooling approach to their home education. Two of these participants reported that they were having to spend time helping their child adjust to the complex trauma they had experienced in school and that a more structured approach to home education would have hindered them in this work. They also described how they had no choice but to be more relaxed and eclectic because their children's trauma was exacerbated by school like approaches.

5.1 COVID-19 remote schooling as a catalyst to home educate

Participants described how the initial COVID-19 school closures, lockdowns and early experiences of school at home gave them confidence to home educate. It was also during this time that they were able to see the bullying their children were experiencing. Parents described seeing clearly what their children were experiencing and concluding that they were better off outside of school.

Amal described her early primary aged daughter as having a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (henceforth ASD) who was described by the teacher and the teacher's aide as too low functioning to help and, as a result, Amal suggested it was during the lockdown and school-at-home period that she was able to observe how little her daughter was doing in school, how little attention the teacher was giving her and how little she was progressing in class interactions with the teacher. Amal described being unhappy with what her daughter was learning and with the interactions between her daughter and her peers in the classroom.

> And when everything [moved] to being delivered online and I saw [what they
> were learning] so initially it's more the case that I withdrew my children from
> school because they really weren't learning anything and it's only with the passage
> of time that I've realized that's probably because they were being bullied.

Amal described how classes moving online meant she was able to observe not only the work that was being done in class but also the interactions between her daughter and her peers. It was through this experience that she realised her daughter was not learning anything not only because she considered the work was inadequate but also because she considered her daughter was being bullied in school. While Amal's story of leaving school was consistent with others' experiences, she was the only participant following a school-at-home approach. For Amal, who was a registered teacher, unschooling was not an option, but her home education style was, by necessity, far more relaxed than her daughter had experienced at school.

Rania, whose daughter was in the gifted and talented program in middle school, stated the school was not adequately teaching her daughter.

During the year when we had all the lockdowns and everything, I had to do the homeschooling. Well, it wasn't really homeschooling, it was crisis schooling. Anyway, we got to see what our child was doing, our child was in the gifted and talented class … Instead of doing what she should have been, teachers would be doing things like they'd say, "there's not enough people here on a Wednesday afternoon so we're not going to do a maths lesson." And then there was the class itself. The kids were so competitive just to a dangerous point they were very aggressive to each other they're bullying each other and the teachers. So that … was my 14-year-old's experience.

Rania stated her daughter was not learning, despite being in the accelerated maths class. She gave the example of Wednesday afternoons when there were not enough students in the class to learn. Wednesday afternoon is traditionally the time for inter-school sporting competitions in Queensland, so if a student was involved in inter-school sport they will be away from the school at that time. However, during the lockdown, there was no inter-school

sport, as it was cancelled by government mandate. Rania also suggested, as Amal alluded to above, there was a lot of competition and bullying which she observed during lock-down for the first time, and that affected her daughter's mental health at school.

Rania talked about how she accessed a mix of resources but that her children "created all the work" based on their interests, Rania described herself as eclectic and relaxed. She stated, "The part I love is interacting with them." The relationship was very important to her, and to all the parents in the study.

Joy also described how her decision to keep her children at home was taken because of the significant bullying her children had experienced in school. She described her frustrations that these incidents occurred despite her many advantages including that she had tried to use the school's bullying policy in her correspondence to the school, as she is a teacher herself, married to a police officer. Despite these advantages, she was unable to solve the issues her son faced. While studying her teaching degree and doing a practicum placement at her sons' rural one-teacher school, she was able to identify and note the significant bullying that happened to her child.

However, even after approaching the teacher, the principal, the school district and even the department, Joy had not had any success getting the school to stop the bullying. The school's proposed fix, a short-term distance education enrolment, was predicated on the department's statement that school was the best place for her children and that the goal was for them to be reintroduced into the school setting despite the significant bullying in that setting. Joy argued that her only choice was to educate as far outside of the schooling system as possible. She acknowledged that it was time consuming as she described it taking two years from school withdrawal to her sons doing any activities that looked even remotely school like (such as producing work for the education department for registration).

In another interview transcript Rachel described how she had been unschooling her daughter for over a year because of severe trauma caused by the bullying her daughter had experienced in school. Some of the trauma led to her primary-school aged daughter self-harming. Rachel is a highly educated medical professional who was taking a break from studying her PhD. As such, in much the same terms as Joy, she was frustrated and upset by how little she was able to change about her daughter's experience of bullying in school. Her daughter had one of the most serious experiences of bullying reported by participants in our study. Rachel described how her daughter had withdrawn herself from the school community, had not engaged with the class or with the teacher and was spending every school day hiding behind the door of the classroom after collecting her work. This trauma was the reason Rachel felt compelled to unschool. Rachel reported that unschooling was the only way to help her daughter to heal and to feel confident to learn again after the experiences of school.

5.2 Deschooling

For the parents of this study who self-identified as unschoolers or eclectic/relaxed homeschoolers (n=5), this process began with a period of deschooling. These parents described how it was vital to deschool after the school withdrawal, and a failure to respect this period would mean their children did not adapt to home education. Deschooling is traditionally described in the home education literature (see Jones, Robinson & Vaughan, 2015) as the period between the end of school and the beginning of being able to learn again, where the child builds a new life for themselves outside of the institution of the school. It is drawn from the work of Ivan Illich. Illich argued deschooling was a process of "separat[ing] learning from social control" (Illich, 1971, p. 19). These parents described the process of de-institutionalising their children after their period of schooling which culminated in serious and severe bullying incidents. In one example Joy, because of her experiences as a school

student, and then in teacher training, described how deschooling was vital for her to unlearn schooling ways of knowledge transmission.

In one account, Rachel described her daughter as gifted and diagnosed with anxiety, complex-Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (c-PTSD), Attention Deficit with Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and ASD. In part, her anxiety had been exacerbated by the bullying she had experienced in her class and the c-PTSD was diagnostically linked to the bullying. Rachel described her deschooling experiences as vital to helping her daughter adapt to life after the bullying. She stated that the process was slow, and she was still deschooling interchangeably with unschooling more than six months after leaving school. As De Wit et al. (2017) noted, unschooling can help a child with significant school induced PTSD and anxiety. In much the same terms as De Wit and colleagues, Rachel stated:

> So we've been– so I've been deschooling and unschooling since September [2021]
> ... The biggest thing for us has been watching a system fail a child so badly. And
> for the first time [daughter] was able to talk to a therapist about the instances of
> neglect, and the experiences she had … she's been diagnosed with c-PTSD
> because you know, even sitting at a desk doing distance education would trigger
> such anxiety, she would curl up to would start to tremble and she would become
> non-verbal and couldn't– there's just so much trauma.

Rachel's transcript seems to suggest that the trauma prevented her daughter from engaging with learning in a structured manner, regardless of whether that learning was in a classroom or at home. Bringing her home, deschooling her for a period, and allowing her the freedom to learn at her own pace and be "free" to use her time, she was opening up, learning to communicate what had happened and was finally making progress in therapy. In this case, unschooling was therapeutic and helped her daughter access formal therapy.

Joy described her son as having a diagnosis of intussusception meaning he would suddenly wet himself at school. He was not receiving messages from his bladder that he needed to go to the toilet and could not control his need to urinate. Joy's children were enrolled in a rural one-teacher-school in New South Wales. Despite the teacher having access to "information and the recommendations from the paediatrician" explaining that the best way to handle the child's needs was to quietly manage the incidents as they occurred, the teacher would instead reprimand Joy's son for wetting himself and then nominate a child or two children to take him to the toilet where much of the bullying occurred. Joy reported that she thought the teacher did not believe her son's doctor or his diagnosis, and thought he was just being a "naughty baby."

For Joy, deschooling was vital to help her children heal from the trauma of the bullying they experienced directly (the experiences of her son with intussusception in the school toilets) or witnessed but were powerless to stop (her other children). Joy used travelling to help deschool her children. Travelling was an important means for her children to, as Illich described, separate themselves from the formality and the strictures of the school context. Joy stated:

> Once we decided to homeschool though, that was when, like in that initial part of the, like the first six months that were away from school it was obviously not good for the kids and then for the– the year and a half that followed, we did a lot of repair, and we just travelled and saw things and we would do things and every other week,

While Joy did not use the word 'deschooling' it was clear from her transcript that travelling was a way for her children to separate learning from the social control of the school system (Illich, 1971) and of de-institutionalising after their traumatic experiences of bullying. For both Joy and Rachel, the process was non-linear, it was slow, and it required the parent to

trust that the time taken was being used to heal and repair. Both parents noted how it was more than six months into the deschooling process before benefits were seen. In Rachel's case, it was more than six months before her daughter was able to open up enough to describe to the therapist some of the experiences she had encountered at school. For Joy, the first six months away from formal schooling was a troubled time, and it was hard for her children to make the adjustment.

What is interesting in both transcripts is the interchangeable use of the terms deschooling and unschooling, with Rachel's transcript describing the two processes as occurring simultaneously. As Jonas et al. (2015) note, there is often a need to shift from homeschooling which "transplants the structure of schooling into the home" via "deschooling [which] refers to an ideology and social critique" to a place where families unschool which "is an ideological reaction and a radical lifestyle shift" (p. 392). For Rachel, she was deschooling and unschooling at the same time. It may be that she was deschooling herself while unschooling her daughter. Similarly, for Joy, the deschooling processes was one where she took her children away from their environments, away from anything to do with the traumatic bullying experiences. She appeared to be using her travelling as both deschooling to remove herself and her sons physically and geographically from school as well as to unschool through hands-on learning experiences. It seems the travelling in her caravan was a radical lifestyle shift that took her and her sons away from all the experiences they had had by geographically removing them. She talked about her experiences as "we were always going away somewhere, yeah we were a bit nomadic" which is, itself, a challenge to the mainstream.

5.3 Unschooling to reduce the tension felt by these young people

As noted above, Joy, who described herself as an unschooler, was using travelling to re-engage her children with learning after their experiences bullying:

We took just any opportunity "Oh, we need to go in to [the nearest town] to get

whatever we need to get" off we go, I will take a week. Like yeah yeah because I

wouldn't do anything that looks like school, but I could take them to really cool

places and teach them stuff that they didn't realize that they're learning like they

went to Victoria, we did a whole lot of work about Victoria, and what that was

and the expedition—and Sturt's exploration expedition and why it failed, and what

they could have done better and all of this.

Joy's work with her children was centred around their interests and needs, and making it look as little like school as possible. She described her caravan was a vital conduit for her children to accept themselves again and to learn, it allowed her to show them learning was interesting, centred on their needs and related to practical, tangible real-life experiences. She described herself as "very unschooling" and travelling was a means for her children to find their passion again.

Even where families did not describe themselves as strictly unschoolers, unlike Joy who welcomed the term, the day was not run on a school schedule and they were far closer to an unschool approach than to anything resembling school at home. For these families, the home was a safe space. Angela, whose son was severely anaphylactic and was chased around the school with a peanut-butter sandwich by the other children because they were trying to see if it would kill him, had found keeping her son home and being led by her son to be restorative because it was completely different from formal education. She said:

Once the stress of the school environment was taken away, he has been so much

happier, and he loves his … homeschooling he hates the thought of having to go

back to that [school] environment, where he's forced to be with these people … In

the classroom you know it's all set out everybody has to do the same thing [but at

> home] he can choose if he doesn't like to do something this way he can choose to
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> do it another way to achieve the same results so homeschooling, it's made him
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> more confident in learning. And generally overall, he's much happier. Much more
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> confident, yeah, I mean for him, it was great. A great choice because so much less
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> stress. The stress levels come right down.

In both examples, the relaxed learning environment at home, and its difference from school, was restorative for their children. In Brooke's case, her son was diagnosed as ASD and was suffering from bullying while at school. Despite moving across the country to Perth, and finding that experience was better, her son had severe trauma whenever school was mentioned or, on return to Queensland, whenever he saw his old school. Brooke reported that she would have to follow a specific route to the shops to avoid the school or her son would have meltdowns. He developed a facial tic because of the bullying experiences in school. She described how her son was called "lonely boy" because he was so scared of going into the playground at lunchtime due to being seriously bashed one lunchbreak. "Lonely boy" was described as a silly pejorative, but Brooke explained that it did not matter what word the other children chose as the label, it was the fact that they could call him names without anything happening that reinforced her son's experience of helplessness while being bullied.

Brooke described how she had initially tried school at home. She explained how she had eventually, with the help of the Queensland home education community online, "found things that work" but it was a long journey. She explained how she had begun with her oldest child by buying text and activity books from the op-shop but he

> would shut down with maths with the books that I had got him. He shut down
>
> didn't want to do it, 'it's too hard, I can't understand, I'm shutting down.'

She explained how the online Queensland homeschooling community helped her when she was unsure of herself and advised her to relax and do whatever she needed to do to help her

son, they suggested she start from her son, not the department's requirements for reporting. The community had allowed her to see that it was okay to be relaxed, it was okay to have days where they did not do "work," it was okay to be child led and it was okay for her sons to be learning at their own pace, in their own way and things that interested them. She called herself a relaxed home educator who was being guided by her sons and using their needs to guide her. She said that this relaxed approach was necessary in order to ensure her son healed from the traumatic experiences of bullying.

Discussion

As the numbers of home educators rise in Australia, it is likely more parents whose children experience bullying will also choose to home educate. Six families were interviewed for this study which sought the stories of families where a child's experience of bullying was the reason they were home educating. Five described themselves as relaxed or eclectic home educators or unschoolers. These five families stated the decision to unschool was not taken actively, it was a result of their child's experiences and their struggles with the anxiety and trauma from the bullying. They did not set out to unschool, instead they were unschooling because they had relaxed and trusted their children and attempted to meet their needs. Unschooling had found them, and they felt it worked for their child. For example, Rachel and Joy described how their child's unschooling approach was vital to re-engaging with learning in any form. They stated that the learning had to be practical, individualised, and focused on the child's interests. Angela and Rania described how the education their child received at home had to be visibly and vastly different from the way their school imposed knowledge, and this knowledge was principally drawn from the child's interests. For Brooke, the home education community had given her permission to relax and to be with her children in the way they needed to learn and to heal from their trauma. In all cases, the young people's

trauma appeared to inform their learning style, their learning needs, and their parents' approaches.

This study is very small, as it is a pilot for a wider study on home education because of bullying in schools. Data were collected from conversations with parents, who were informed of the definition of bullying before the interviews occurred. All parents self-identified for this project. It is likely these stories are representative of a much larger group of families in Australia. After COVID, many more families chose home education after seeing what their children were doing, how they were being treated in school and were empowered by knowing they could home educate (see English, 2021a). If we were to repeat this study in five years, it is likely there would be even more families in the position of these participants, unschooling as a means of helping their children cope with the trauma they reported experiencing through bullying at school.

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