

# Getting a risk-free trial during COVID: Accidental and deliberate home educators, responsabilisation and the growing population of children being educated outside of school

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*Abstract:* Numbers coming out of education departments in Australia suggest that, even though most Australian schools are open, and families are able to send their children to them, increasing numbers of parents are deciding to keep their children at home for their education (Queensland Government: Department of Education, 2020). It may be that, as the president of Australia’s home education representative body stated during the pandemic, Covid school closures offered a “risk-free trial” of home education (Lever, 2020) by providing an a-posteriori experience of education outside of schools. Building on the Covid experiences, this paper suggests that ‘accidentally falling into’ home education may be significant in understanding parents’ home education choices. Using numbers of home educators from Australia, and the associated data on their location and ages, this paper argues responsabilisation (see Doherty & Dooley, 2018) provides a suitable lens to examine how parents may decide, after an a-posteriori experience such as Covid school closures and previous, often negative, experiences of schooling, to home educate in the medium to long term. This paper proposes that increasing numbers of home educators will be seen in various jurisdictions where families perceive themselves responsabilised to home educate due to Covid as an a-posteriori experiences of home education. The

paper proposes these families are ‘accidental’ home educators (English, 2021). By contrast, much more stable is the ‘deliberate’ home education population, those whose choices are based in a-priori beliefs about schooling. The paper proposes that the accidental home education category may be better able to explain the growing numbers of home educators in Australia and across the world, providing a means for governments to respond to the needs of this cohort, and the policies required to manage this population.

*Key words:* home education, homeschool growth, COVID home learning, responsibilisation, Australian education

## Introduction

Australia is experiencing a substantial growth in home educators. Since the practice was legalised around the country (for example, it was legalised in Queensland in the 1990s), the numbers remained steady until they massively increased in the last decade or so. This paper explores ways we can theorise that growth in numbers through the theoretical lens of responsibilisation (Doherty & Dooley, 2018). Rather than rely on previous notions of choice to examine the rise in home education numbers, this paper suggests that the old binaries of ideologues/pedagogues (see Van Galen, 1991) on which many discussions of the choice to home educate rely, no longer hold and it is better to understand how motivations, experiences of education and students’ needs collide to produce the growth in home educators. In the wake of the COVID-19 school closures, families had new experiences of education in the form of school at home and many saw, for perhaps the first time, what their children were doing at school (Ferguson, 2021).

Using the data on home educators in Australia, coming at the end of the COVID school lockdowns and the pandemic’s closure of much of Australia’s economic and social activity, the paper suggests that we can conceptualise new ways of understanding choice in the post-COVID education ‘market’. The paper begins by examining the choice literature and narrows this literature down by examining the choice to home educate. It then proposes a theoretical lens of responsibilisation (Doherty & Dooley, 2018) to examine how parents in a post-COVID schooling environment are further pushed to make effective choices that suit their children’s needs. This environment is one where significant a-posteriori experiences of education were encountered during the lockdowns where parents were actively engaged with their children’s schooling work. As such, it provided families who were leaning toward home education a chance to experience the approach firsthand, albeit

modified, as they were at home with their children and working with them on their learning activities.

This paper uses these data to propose that the growth in home educators post-COVID may be representative of the negative perceptions of schooling held by a large number of parents prior to the pandemic (Neuman, 2019). It may be that, as the title of this paper suggests, the school closures provided a 'risk free trial' of home education for parents who were inclined toward it, and this experience may have contributed to the huge growth in numbers currently reported by Australian states and territories in their annual reports on their activities (Lever, 2020).

It is useful, before we begin, to explain the Australian education system because it is a system with a long history of private provision of education. Starting with the church provision of education, prior to a government education system, Australia has a long history of private education provision so that home education, which fits on a private education continuum (see English, 2013), is not necessarily part of a neo-liberal education project, as is argued in much research (de Oliveira & Barbosa, 2017). Rather than a system, per se, it is a series of interconnected services that operate at state level with minimal federal oversight. As the majority of Australia's school aged students attend a government run (and funded) school, the principal funding source for Australian schooling is state and territory departments of education, hence the nomenclature of government schools. These departments fund schools through recurrent costs grants (Australian Government: Department of Education, Skills and Employment, nd). The federal department of education offers one-off top up grants to state governments to fund schools through grants (Harrington, 2011). The federal department of education funds non-government schools, however this name is misleading because the federal government provides a significant share, and an increasingly large percentage, of non-government school running costs (Harrington, 2011; Australian Government: Department of Education, Skills and Employment, nd). So that, regardless of what school type a student attends, the government is the principal funder of each Australian child's school education. The federal recurrent grants are called SRSs (Schooling Resource Standards) and while the federal government provides 20 per cent of the SRSs to government schools, they provide 80 per cent to non-government schools. By contrast, state and territory funding contributions to government schools are set at a percentage of the SRS and are determined by a series of factors including enrolment numbers, indexation (compared to inflation), student characteristics (such as the numbers of

students with special educational needs and those who are determined to be socio-economically disadvantaged (which is determined by postcode data) and school characteristics.

Missing from these data sets are home educated students who, because they attract no funding from the government, are not counted in educational funding data. While anecdotal data suggests there is some debate in the community about whether schools funding should extend to home educators, there appears to be no appetite at government level to increase funding of education to cover the needs and expenses of home educators (personal communication, K. Chegwidan, March 19, 2021). The lack of representation for home educators in funding discussions may also indicate their lack of consideration at government level which may prove problematic if the numbers continue to grow as they have in recent years.

## **Responsibilisation and Educational Choice**

Underlying all discussions of schools' funding is the notion of choice. Much like the USA and the UK, Australian families are considered to have a 'choice' about their children's schooling, and they are understood to operate that choice in a market. In this paper, it is accepted that the choice of a school or, in the case of home educators to educate outside of the country's schooling system, is undertaken in a market for education. A market for education is understood to operate as a neo-liberal choice making exercise. Under these conditions, no choice is 'neutral', and all have a value in the market. This value is tied, in Australia more obviously due to complex government arrangements that pays for almost all the running cost of non-government schools, to education funding so that the money that is paid to schools by governments is directly tied to enrolments. As such, all schools, regardless of their affiliation, are competing in a market for students where the decision of a student (or that student's family) to attend a particular school is a zero-sum game, in that the money that student attracts is taken out of one school and taken to a different school, or not taken to any school as is the case with the home education cohort.

For more than two decades, much of the work that explores education choice has looked at schools from a sociological perspective (Ball, Bowe & Gerwitz, 1996; Reay, 1998; Ball, Davis, David & Reay, 2002; Thompson, 2018), frequently using Bourdieu's theoretical approaches (Ball, Bowe & Gerwitz, 1996; Reay, 1998; James, 2015; Byrne & Devine, 2017), or Bourdieusian scholarship (Lareau, 2000). Many examine the growth of the non-

government school sector, frequently citing social class and valued cultural capital as a means of explaining schooling choices (Byrne & Devine, 2017). These studies argue that education is ‘women’s work’ in which women are relied upon to provide early childhood education to prepare children for school and, when there, to supplement their children’s school education with enriching activities, assistance with, and to manage homework, social engagements and co-curricular tasks (Lareau, 1987; 2000; 2002; 2011; Griffiths & Smith, 2005). Some of this work looks outside of the mainstream school system to include private tutoring to argue a further example of how the educational market has changed Australia’s education landscape (Briant, Doherty, Dooley & English, 2020). These papers suggest that, far from being a neutral option for Australian parents, the use of private tutoring companies skews the opportunities available to students in an education market, affecting the market for scholarships in private schools and prestigious government school enrolments out of catchment. As such, they suggest that any view of the education market in Australia, that explores and examines market forces and their effects on Australian schooling provision, must necessarily consider those parents who look outside of traditional schools.

Studies have connected the desire to operate outside of the schooling system through private tutoring with home education (Aurini & Davis, 2005). As Aurini and Davis (2005) rightly point out, the drive to home educate is similar to the drive to private tutoring, in particular in its taking on of significant amounts of work normally associated with schools. Doherty and Dooley (2018, pp. 1-2) argue that this work, in the context of private tutoring, is a type of responsabilisation as parents are driven to make the choice because of a reflexivity and a “willingness to bear the consequences of one’s actions” so that a fusion occurs between market and moral logics underway in the moralisation of markets”. As such, where increasing numbers of children are being educated at home in Australia (English, 2021) it may be that parents are moralised by market imperatives to meet their children’s needs outside of schools.

Because of its difference from formal schooling, most Australian departments of education have termed the practice, home education. My previous work examining mothers’ work in home education has argued that the choice is connected to other parenting factors including the identification with particular parenting strategies (English, 2013; 2015), that it is frequently an a-posteriori decision taken after exposure to negative experiences at schools (English, 2021) and that there has been a significant growth in the numbers

of parents who are choosing to home educate (English, 2019; 2021). That latter point, about the growth in numbers, is supported by a good deal of international work in the field (Ray, 2021). In many cases, these families are middle class and are choosing home education with the same expectation of success as families who choose an elite school might (Erickson, 2005; Seo, 2009; Lois, 2013).

However, it is dangerous to see home education as a purely middle-class project practiced only by white, middle-class, two parent families with the resources to afford an educational alternative. Increasingly, families who identify as being ‘minority’ are choosing home education to ameliorate disadvantages their children face in schooling (Fields-Smith, 2015) with a good deal of success (Puga, 2019; 2021; Fields-Smith, 2015). This success is often connected to maintenance of cultural and social links. These studies suggest home educated children in minority families experience success because they are taken out of schools where negative stereotypes, systematic racism and a history of teachers’ low expectations combine with the hidden curriculum (Fields-Smith, 2015) and colonial approach to education (Puga, 2019) affect students’ experiences of success and outcomes from schooling relative to their white peers. As in other studies, the focus in this work is on mothers’ experiences and motivations to choose home education.

Increasingly, studies that take a sociocultural approach to examine school choice are using the term *responsibilisation* in their work (Doherty & Dooley, 2018). While not using the term ‘responsibilisation’ in their studies, Puga (2019; 2021) and Fields-Smith (2015) describe how parents are seeing themselves as increasingly responsible for their children’s education which informs their choice to keep their children home rather than keep them at school. Responsibilisation refers to the concept of risk, and the work of managing that risk in late neo-liberal, late stage capitalist societies. In these societies, success, or even a good standard of living, is no longer guaranteed, and people are made responsible for their success or failure; under these conditions, success is a moral imperative, failure is a personal inadequacy and limited consideration is given to the social and cultural conditions affecting the individual’s experiences (see Peters, 2017; Keddie, 2016; Rose, 2007). This theoretical lens asserts the responsibility for the management of any risk is transferred from the collective instruments of the state, for example schools, to the individual. The change has been to a form of self-governance and individual subjectivity (cf. Rose, 1996; 2007; Keddie, 2016). In this conceptualisation, as Peters (2017) notes, it refers to the privatisa-

tion of all parts of the economy, so that the individual bears both the losses and the gains of their own decisions.

Responsibilisation is often framed as a rational choice, where the morality of the market is at play whereby social relations are grounded in the rationality of a suite of choices offered simultaneously in a market. It is connected to the dominance of the market in neo-liberal educational discourse where individuals, and corporations, take on the roles that were previously considered the domain of the caring, social-distributive welfare state (Shamir, 2008). Peters (2017) describes it as the state forcing responsibility and responsibilisation on the individual, their family, and professionals who support families. He states, it forces “individuals to take care of themselves through enhanced choice-making in the market place” (Peters, 2017, p. 140).

O'Malley (2009) described responsibilisation as a process of rendering democratic subjects individually responsible for tasks that were once offered by the state. He uses the example of dental care where once it was offered by government services, now it is a supplement paid to private providers to allow families to choose with their wallets the services that suit them, in much the same terms as the move to home education. For O'Malley (2009, p. 276), the increased responsibilisation of the average citizen is a different set of values because the welfare state took responsibility, and agency, away from citizens who were able to avoid accountability for decisions and actions that might reasonably have been seen as their domain.

As Peters (2017), Doherty and Dooley (2018) and others (Haman, 2010) suggest, responsibilisation is a theoretical lens that suggests that individuals act rationally to further their own interests, they accept this responsibility, albeit not always voluntarily as, in many cases, the risks of living in late-stage, neo-liberal capitalism forces these individuals to accept these responsibilities. However, these authors argue, the preservation of their interests, and those of their children, are seen as the responsibility of the individual and are managed through rational actions. Under these conditions, the move to home education, increasingly popular with children who do not fit in at school, often because of a special educational need (Slater, Burton & McKillop, 2020) makes sense, the choice to home education is seen as agents acting in their (children's) self-interest, as entrepreneurs of themselves who are able to undertake rational, cost-benefit calculations, at the exclusion of other values and judgements, to form a rational decision.

In addition, these studies argue that responsabilisation is connected to increasing levels of uncertainty, where old models of social reproduction are no longer reliable and, as such, there are risks for families trying to ensure social reproduction. The result is a focus on the individual, and their role as the nucleus of the society, rather than the state, which, as Giddens and Beck argue, was imperfect in any event. While it has been previously applied to educational research (McLeod, 2015) and to education choice research (Ball, 2003) it is increasingly being applied to home education research (English, 2021).

At the same time as the change in the educational landscape has led to increased uncertainty, there has witnessed a comprehensive move toward education outside of formal schools. Several studies have looked at the trends towards home education and suggested that, with the school closures in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be a further, marked, increase in home education over the coming years (cf. Prior, 2020; Ankel, 2020; Neaves, 2020; English, 2021). These studies, and others which explore the choice to home educate (English, 2015; 2019; 2020; Rothermel, 2003; 2015) suggest that parental motivation to home educate may be impacted by children's experiences of education in schools. In particular, students who identify as having a special educational need may be more likely to be home educated.

Special educational needs, and the inability of schools to properly address the needs of this cohort, are frequently cited as a reason to home educate (Slater, Burton & McKillop, 2020). Related to responsabilisation, these studies suggest parents are 'forced' to home educate when they have exhausted all other choices available in schools. In particular, these studies identify many SENs, with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) being highlighted in several places. Studies (Slater, Burton & McKillop, 2020) suggest that students who identify as having an ASD are benefited by the choice to home educate. They are more settled, experience better academic success (Abdullah, 2017; Lawrence, 2018; Khaustov & Schumskih, 2019; Simmons & Campbell, 2019; Slater, Burton & McKillop, 2020) and have times to visit therapists and specialists that are affected by the timing of the school day (Gribble & English, 2016). Further, parents who choose to home educate, especially after their child who identifies as having ASD has been schooled for a period of time, also describe greater satisfaction with the experience of home education in comparison to schools (Abdullah, 2017; Lawrence, 2018; Khaustov & Schumskih, 2019; Simmons & Campbell, 2019; Slater, Burton & McKillop, 2020).



It is interesting to note that studies suggest that many parents, regardless of their education choice are dissatisfied with schools (Neuman, 2019). Neuman (2019, p. 727) stated disaffection with school was not limited to home educators, rather, “many studies have revealed dissatisfaction and criticism of the education system among parents who send their children to school, as well”. However, home educators are so dissatisfied that even the promise of the ‘teacher as babysitter’ is not enough to entice them to stay. Neuman (2019) noted that while both groups saw schooling as deeply flawed, anachronistic and as promoting mediocrity, it was the ways schools “primarily gave parents free time to work and seek self-fulfilment, in effect serving as a babysitter” (p. 731) that kept parents in the system. With that option gone during the pandemic school closures, and middle-class work increasingly being allowed to be conducted at home, this effect may no longer hold. By contrast, in the Neuman (2019) study, home education families privileged the need for their child to learn “things that are relevant to life today” (p. 732). In addition, the home education group were concerned with “the argument against the trend of standardisation in the schools” stating it was “that school is not suited to all children” that it is “rigid”, “doesn’t see the children” and “doesn’t take personal needs into consideration” that promoted the move out of institutionalised education (Neuman, 2019, p. 735). This argument may have intensified with the Covid school shutdowns.

In what follows, Australia’s 2021 data release of home education numbers, correct to the end of 2020, are discussed.

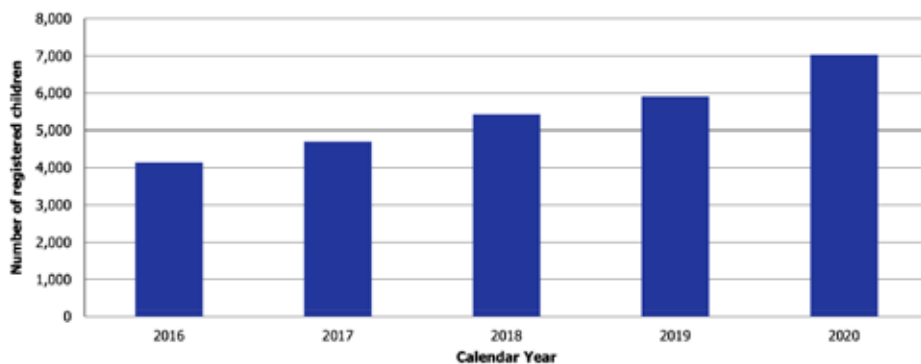
## Data

By early 2021, all the departments of education across the eastern states of Australia had released their 2019-2020 home education data. These data are drawn from the three states (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland) and a territory (Australian Capital Territory) where the majority of the Australian population are located. Below, data are tabulated. It is noted that the reporting periods vary from state to state and that not all states generate a report on their population enrolled in state education (as either students in schools or students registered for home education), to illustrate both New South Wales and Victoria generate reports while Queensland does not; rather, it updates its data pivot tables on a website but does not advertise the numbers (personal communication, S. Bryan, January 5, 2021). In addition, reporting periods vary across states so that the data on the 2020 statics in New South Wales include some late 2019 registrations while the Victorian and Queensland data are based on the academic year from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020. Significantly, (see English 2015; 2019; 2021) there is

a significant under registration of families and children in Australia so that the data may not accurately represent the total numbers of home educators (Townsend, 2012). Families may choose not to register for myriad reasons, including difficulties faced by the registration system, a fear of authorities or a desire to not undertaken onerous reporting requirements (see English, 2021; Krogh & Liberto, 2021). Tables are taken from the reports or the websites of the departments to show the differences in reporting across the states chosen for this study. Again, these states were chosen as they are the largest population centres in Australia and have the highest numbers of home educated young people.

### *New South Wales*

In New South Wales, Australia's most populous state and the state with the largest home education population, the data showed a higher growth in 2019-2020 than was found in previous reporting periods. Looking at the raw numbers of registered children, the data suggest there were 1126 more students home educating at the end of the 2020 reporting period than in the same point at the end of the 2019 reporting period. This rise was more than double the increase reported at the end of the 2019 reporting period. The data, taken from New South Wales Educational Standards Authority (NESA) Annual report 2019-2020 (New South Wales Government: NESA, 2021), is shown in the table below.



**Note:**

1. The number of registered children includes children who have exemption from registration.

**Figure 1:** New South Wales Government: NESA, 2021, p. 4

As noted in the note on the above graph, and unlike other states and territories, New South Wales allows for exemptions from registration for a variety of reasons, principally religious. If families' religion does not support government intervention, through registration with government authorities, they are able to exempt themselves from school and home education registration (NESA, 2020). The following table, taken from a different report, outline these data. As with the previous table from New South Wales, the numbers of exempted children grew over the time period.

	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20
Number of children with exemption from registration	182	183	189	196
Number of families	88	95	83	94

**Figure 2:** New South Wales Government: NESA, 2020, p. 38

As such, the population of students not in schools, and registered for home education or exempted from registration in New South Wales in 2020 has grown 19 per cent on the 2019 figures. This table also demonstrates how, even within reports, data are presented in different and inconsistent ways.

### *Victoria*

Australia's second most populous state is Victoria. This state has shown a very large growth in home education numbers between the reporting periods ending 2019 and 2020. Their data is presented both as a raw number (7296 young people home educating at the end of 2020) and a percentage growth (up 20 per cent on the 2019 figures). Victoria does not have the same exemption regulations as does New South Wales, so there are no exemption figures to report.

These data show not only the growth numbers and percentages but also historical growth data. Interestingly, these data are uneven in their growth, with two years in particular around the 20 per cent growth (2017 and 2020). In addition, it is noted that Victoria suffered significantly longer lock-downs and school closures than did the other states and territories. They endured two hard lock-downs with school closures while states like Queensland, data from which are reported below, only endured a short period of lock-down and school closures and did not suffer through more than one protracted lockdown in 2020.



**Figure 3:** Victorian Government: Victorian Registrations and Qualifications Authority (VQRA)

### Queensland

Queensland is Australia's second largest state by geographic area and its third largest by population. Research in Australia (Libertino & Guiliani, 2021; English, 2021) suggests the registration requirements may affect registration numbers and, the onerousness of Queensland's strict requirements, coupled with the department's fractious relationship with home educators (principally through their lack of engagement with the home education community), may affect compliance in this state (personal communication, K. Gribble, 5 April, 2021). It has been previously reported that numbers

Sum of Student Count	Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Age as at 1st July						
5			79	68	81	102
6	180	193	267	229	335	
7	237	285	301	338	378	
8	276	299	353	336	427	
9	267	288	370	371	398	
10	272	285	348	381	455	
11	245	263	341	348	425	
12	224	257	318	314	409	
13	204	225	301	326	422	
14	183	180	259	323	398	
15	134	138	205	210	343	
16	59	69	82	118	167	
17	22	19	19	36	38	
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2303</b>	<b>2580</b>	<b>3232</b>	<b>3411</b>	<b>4297</b>	

**Figure 4:** Queensland Government: Queensland Department of Education (2021).

are significantly under-reported in Queensland (Townsend, 2012) due, in part to fractious departmental relationships with the home education community (personal communication, K. Chegwiddden, 19 March, 2021). The following table is a pivot taken from the Department of Education's website (Queensland Government: Queensland Department of Education, 2021) which links to an automatically downloading Excel spreadsheet of data. No effort is made to make this data easy to find nor is it easy to interpret, it is not presented in a visually appealing way and is not reported with nuance as in other states and territories.

As with New South Wales, percentages are not calculated. The total growth of the total cohort of home educators from end-2019 to end-2020 is 886 total students or a growth of ~26%. This growth is, as with New South Wales and Victoria, significantly higher than the ~5% growth between 2018 and 2019.

#### *Australian capital territory*

The Australian Capital Territory is Australia's largest territory, but its population fluctuates with parliamentary sitting periods. These data tables were obtained from the department (personal communication, K. Chegwiddden, 19 March, 2020). Data also report increases on previous years. As with the states reported above, there was a large growth in numbers between the end of the reporting period 2019 and 2020.

	Year as at February census										
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of registered students	115	119	122	166	177	192	252	271	303	305	322
Annual growth %	-	3%	3%	36%	6%	9%	31%	8%	11%	0.66%	5.5%
% Growth since 2010	-	3%	6%	44%	54%	70%	119%	135%	163%	165%	180%

**Figure 5:** Personal communication, K. Chegwiddden, 19 March, 2020.

In each case, the numbers are clearly increasing, however, the ACT data is slower than the other states.

## Responsibilisation and Growth

Data from New South Wales, reported in written documentation, suggest reasons for growth in that state. New South Wales' report states that, while data on reasons for choosing to home educate have, since 2010, been collected, this collection is ad-hoc and opt-in so that parents are not compelled to report their motivations. The department stated, "the most common reasons have been philosophical choice, religious reasons and an individualised approach to addressing the special learning needs of the child" (New South Wales Government: NESAs, 2020, p. 38). Victoria's registration authority "do[es] not ask parents why they register their children for home schooling [sic]" (Victorian Government: Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, 2020). Similarly, as with Queensland and the ACT, there is not only no statement that data is not collected (some data is collected on the registration form in Queensland but is not reported or mentioned in the yearly statistics), no data, other than raw numbers, are reported.

However, data from New South Wales, and studies presented overseas, may signal the reasons for significant post-COVID growth across Australia's mainland east coast. Research in other jurisdictions suggest that parents are increasingly choosing home education when their children are diagnosed with a special education need and find that schooling is not working well for their children (Abdullah, 2017; Lawrence, 2018; Khaustov & Schumskih, 2019; Simmons & Campbell, 2019; Slater, Burton & McKillop, 2020). These studies suggest many SEN children are a square peg in a round hole in schools and that may explain their parents' choice to keep them home and home educate (Slater, Burton & McKillop, 2020). These studies (Abdullah, 2017; Lawrence, 2018; Khaustov & Schumskih, 2019; Simmons & Campbell, 2019; Slater, Burton & McKillop, 2020) have found that students who identify as having ASD in particular, are frequently choosing home education (Slater, Burton & McKillop, 2020) and are more satisfied than they were at school (Simmons & Campbell, 2019), their parents are more satisfied with the choice (Dolan, 2017) and they are more successful in learning than they were at school (Morse & Bell, 2018).

Parents of children with Special Education Needs reported that, in some cases, their children were much happier during the COVID school closures. While the traditional, stereotype, of the home educated child with special education needs is of isolation and loneliness (see Kremer, 2019 for an excellent example of the discourse in photo-essay form), this experience may not be commonplace. Media reports have suggested that many of the chil-

dren who identify as having special education needs have thrived during lockdown (Jayanetti, 2021; Clarke, 2020). Rather than feeling isolated or disengaged, many were able to manage their learning more effectively with technological tools and time that allowed this cohort of students to really work to their capacity (Clarke, 2020). As such, and in line with findings from other studies of students with special educational needs, this cohort may explain much of the growth in home education numbers in the 2020 home education reporting cycle in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland at least.

However, conversely, parents who have a child with a special educational need may be loath to register because of negative schooling experiences. As Neuman (2019) notes, parents who home educate are no different from parents who keep their children in school in seeing schooling as problematic, however, they are differently motivated to ensure their children's satisfaction in their education. Previous work by the author also proposes that parents are responsabilised to keep their children home, especially where those children have a special educational need, and that this is the major driver of growth in the home education sector (English, 2021). As such, understanding how this 'accidental' home education population is driven to make the choice is paramount in understanding the growth of this cohort in the education sector.

Accidental home educators are those for whom an a-posteriori experience of education drives the choice. These families may be responsabilised to educate at home because their experience in public or private schools has not been a good educational experience for their child. The families who are accidental home educators may be home educating in response to risks experienced in schooling, specifically due to the child's special education need (such as ASD), psychological need (such as trauma or anxiety), or in relation to bullying (Kuntzman & Gaither, 2013), or some other problem in schools. For example, as Green and Hoover-Dempsey (2007) note, they may object to the ways the schools manage students with specific educational needs, but they may not be a priori opposed to mainstream schooling. Their opposition is, instead, a posteriori, and they accidentally fall in to this choice because of particular empirical, lived and embodied experiences of school.

What is different in 2021, and beyond, is the a-posteriori experience of almost all schooling families with home learning during the COVID pandemic lockdowns. Every single family with school aged children experienced school closures and lockdowns and, as a result, had what Chegwidened of

the Home Education Association in Australia noted was a 'risk free trial of home education' (Lever, 2020). It may be that the growth in numbers in the 2021 reporting from the authorities around Australia is a reflection of these a-posteriori experiences with (a) schooling and (b) home schooling during the lockdown, leading to an increased choice to home educate.

By far the largest growth was in Queensland. In spite of onerous reporting requirements and a long delay in processing times, this state experienced nearly 30 per cent growth on the numbers in 2019. This state only experienced one protracted lockdown that closed schools and there was a second, very short, lockdown that occurred over the school holidays. However, these data suggest the numbers of Queensland families home educating is very large in the wake of the lockdowns. Further, anecdotal data, such as the calls to the state's Home Education Association helpline and the Facebook groups run by the Association, suggest a large number of requests for assistance and an increase in interest in home education in Queensland (personal communication, K. Chegvidden, March 19, 2021). It may be that, in spite of onerous reporting requirements, Queensland families felt increasingly responsabilised to home educate after an a-posteriori experience of schooling (through the school at home work being left for their children) and also home education (through keeping their children home from school during lockdown). The second largest growth was in Victoria, the state with the heaviest lockdown restrictions and the most lockdowns. This state experienced growth of ~20 per cent, far higher than the lowest growth, experienced in the Australian Capital Territory of 5.5 per cent. In New South Wales, arrangements for registering home education families changed during the 2020 registration period, as it was impossible for families to receive a visit from an 'Authorised Person' who decides if families are fit and proper people to home educate. This change, and perhaps increased ease of registration, may be in part the explanation for the growth in numbers by 15 per cent on the previous year's total. However, it may also be that the a-posteriori experience of home educating during COVID also showed many parents it was possible.

School closures and lockdowns showed that, while schools offer a service in child-minding and that may be their principal attraction to dissatisfied parents who keep their children in schools (Neuman, 2019), schools' baby-sitting function was by no means guaranteed. If parents are increasingly seeing schooling as not working for their children (Ray, 2021) and, having tried home education during COVID, have decided that it is at least doable and manageable, there remains limited motivation to continue to send chil-



dren to school. It may be, if children were (1) seen to thrive at home during COVID school closures, especially those with Special Educational Needs, (2) finding their educational attainment improved, (3) their motivation to do their school work and (3) their ability to concentrate and be engaged on their tasks increased when at home (Chaminda, 2021) it makes sense that their 'risk free trial' may become a more permanent project. Responsibilisation suggests that parents are, in any event, increasingly made to feel responsibility for their children's success or failure, and that choosing an education for their children in which they experience success is part of that work, it may be that home education makes increasing sense when, after being forced to experience it during 2020 with school closures, it proved to be a better alternative than what the schools were sending home.

## Conclusions/Discussion

As Arai (2000) has argued in a study in Canada, for many families, the decision to home educate took years to come to fruition. Similarly, as others have noted (Knowles, 1991; Rothermel, 2003), for many who choose to home educate, even the ideologues of Van Galens' (1991) study, the choice often comes after a period of schooling. Add to these studies the practical and lived experience of schooling at home during COVID school closures and it may be that the majority of families whose home education was reported in the 2020 statistics in Australia are doing so not as their first choice, but as a decision they come to after a period of schooling. For those that have not chosen home education before, the 'risk free trial' offered by school closures may have been enough of a push to make it a more permanent choice.

This paper has used data from the education departments of three Australian states and a territory that reported on their numbers of home educators at the end of the 2020 reporting cycle. None of these jurisdictions compel families to give reasons for choosing home education. Indeed, even though families are compelled to register, there is evidence that it is only a small majority of families that actually do their legal duty and register their children as home educators (Townsend, 2012; English, 2021). While these data show an increase in the home education population, what is missing from the quantitative statistics is the qualitative data explaining parents' choices. However, the large increase coming on the back of school closures and COVID shutdowns of public services suggests that the rise in the home education population is, at least in part, motivated by the a-posteriori experiences of schooling at home. However, the relationship between school closures and home education increases is speculative. While we do know that parents are

increasingly unhappy with schools (Neuman, 2019), and that home education has been seen as a panacea for many families whose children were struggling at school, in particular those who identify with a special educational need (see English, 2021), this link is speculative. We also know that the numbers of home educators have been increasing over the years and the data in Australia from the departments of education bear that out.

This paper is a call to action to collect more data so that the community can understand parents' motivations to home educate and how much the 'risk free trial' they experienced during COVID changed their minds about school and home education. It is imperative that further data is collected to examine exactly what parents report as their motivation to home educate. Why are more Australian families deciding home education is worth the effort? Why are families increasingly responsabilised toward home education rather than just settling for the schooling system or for schooling with supplemental education through private tutoring? If families are unhappy with the schools' services, and are increasingly driven to take on the responsibility of home educating, how many more will withdraw their children? What will happen as departments' budgets are affected by the numbers of students being withdrawn? It also begs the question, what is the tipping point for budgets, if the growth so far is not affecting their registration and regulation behaviour? If there are between 15 per cent and 25 per cent growth in the three largest states, at what point does the government, at state/territory and at federal level, consider the growth to be worth investigating further and when do they start to consider home education to be a mainstream choice?

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