A History of Home-education in Australia

Introduction:

This paper is a study of the ideas influencing the development of the contemporary homeschooling movement. The paper will achieve three objectives:  
i) to briefly identify what is homeschooling, and why people are choosing this education option;   
ii) to review the chronology of the key people and events that influenced the development of homeschooling internationally and in Australia; and finally   
iii) to discuss (using a Christian worldview lens) the undergirding ideologies that have influenced both the normal school system and the homeschool environment.

The Queensland Education Department defines homeschooling as a “movement characterised by parents taking full responsibility for their children’s education instead of delegating that responsibility to …an institution” (Qld Education Department, 2003, p. 6). Why do homeschoolers choose to educate their own children at home in spite of the enormous cost in time and personal freedom, as well as the loss of a second wage? McNeice (1995, section 1.4) conducted a survey of homeschool parents which identified four major concerns. Ongoing anecdotal evidence from speaking with over 3000 homeschooling parents during the past nineteen years (McNeice, 2014), has confirmed the initial survey results.

* Basic literacy and numeracy; and/or poor academic standards, either of the particular child, or of the class teaching/content
* The need for an individually differentiated programme for children with learning difficulties
* The undermining or ridiculing of the parental values, beliefs, and/or authority.
* A more general concern about the deterioration in the quality of family life and culture in our society.

These families have not gone into homeschooling flippantly. Many reported that they had struggled long and hard to find a way to keep their children at school, before resigning themselves to the necessary sacrifice.

To further understand why homeschoolers are leaving the school system, we need to explore the roots and aims of the mass compulsory schooling movement, how these initial ideologies are still affecting the education system today, and consequently influencing the continued choice to educate at home.

In the mid to late 1800s, the utilitarian captains of industry funded the move to compulsory schooling for all, based on the “Prussian model” (Gatto, 2006, p.126). In the guise of a desire for ‘moral training’, they aimed to produce a population of compliant factory workers who could be easily controlled by the State for the benefit of the ‘economy’ (Toffler, 1980, p. 43).

Many education scholars are aware of the philosophically flawed manipulative agendas of the mass compulsory school movement, and look to John Dewey’s ‘progressive education’ principles as a remedy because his ideas seem more democratic and ‘learner-centred’. However Dewey, as one of the co-signatories of the Humanist Manifesto, had a religious agenda contrary to Christianity, as evidenced in his book ‘A Common Faith’ (Dewey, 1934, p.3). There was a calculated move to make school the ideological alternative to religion. Gatto (2006) claims many of those known as “great educators— Komensky, Mather, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Mann, Dewey, Sears, Cubberley, Thorndike, et al.— were ideologues looking for a religion to replace one they never had or had lost faith in” (p. 126).

In 1896, Dewey reportedly said that…

“independent, self-reliant people were a counter-productive anachronism in the collective society of the future. In modern society, said Dewey, people would be defined by their associations--not by their own individual accomplishments. In such a world, people who read too well or too early are dangerous because they become privately empowered, they know too much, and know how to find out what they don't know by themselves, without consulting experts. Dewey said the great mistake of traditional pedagogy was to make reading and writing constitute the bulk of early schoolwork. He advocated that the phonics method of teaching reading be abandoned and replaced by the whole word method, not because the latter was more efficient (he admitted it was less efficient) but because independent thinkers are produced by hard books, thinkers who cannot be socialised very easily. By socialisation, Dewey meant a program of social objectives administered by the best social thinkers in government” (Gatto, 2010).

Although most Christian educators would usually say there is much to be commended in Dewey’s ‘learner-centred’ approach, Schiro (2013, p. 5) identifies at least two embedded principles that are at odds with a Christian worldview of education: “people are essentially good in nature;….and…people are viewed as the source of content for the curriculum”. Under Dewey’s humanist philosophy, truth is relative, and meaning is ‘constructed’ by the individual according to what they experience. These may all seem to be harmless enough ideas; but are they really? Ideas have consequences. As CS Lewis (1972) notes, ‘We are now getting to the point where different beliefs about the universe lead to different behaviour” [and inevitable outcomes] (p. 3).

Is it possible that the homeschoolers are reacting to the natural fruit of a system based on a flawed ideology?

A Chronology of Events:

After identifying what homeschooling is, and attempting to understand what the homeschoolers are reacting to, it may be instructive to chronicle the major events and people who have influenced the development of the contemporary homeschooling movement. The following is a list of the major turning points in the history of homeschooling.

Even though compulsory mass schooling was introduced in most Western countries in the late 1800s, there would inevitably be those who would not be able to attend school because of illness, disability, distance, or parents travelling. An early example of a school that catered to isolated learners via ‘correspondence’ courses was the Calvert School. In 1905, during an epidemic in the Baltimore area, the principal, Virgil Hillyer, created home-study materials for the children who were away sick. When they returned after their long illness, he was greatly impressed that they had achieved as much as if they had been at school. This initial success sparked the idea of making correspondence study materials available to the general public. An initial advertisement in National Geographic netted 200 enquiries, and by 1911, Calvert had 300 enrolled students (Painter, 2006).

Moving against the tide of the late 1800s, the educator Charlotte Mason, spoke out against the influence of Prussian educational philosopher Herbart who said “children should be cut to fit” (Mason, 1918; Gatto, 2006, p. 127). From the early 1870s, Mason strove for a practical outworking of her Christian beliefs as applied to the education of children (Mason, 1918).

In spite of the compulsory schooling laws, wealthier families and nobility, as well as middle class families unable to afford expensive private schools, often had home-based tutors and governesses. Concerned about the poor standard of education delivered by inadequately trained governesses in middle class households, Mason wrote a book called ‘Home Education’ in 1886. From 1890 she published a regular newsletter, ‘The Parents’ Review’, to help those who were educating at home. In this way Charlotte Mason could be called the first ‘Homeschool Consultant’ (Redeemer University College, n.d.; Living Books, n.d.).

In 1887 Mason established the Parents’ National Education Union (PNEU), and a teacher training college, the ‘House of Education’, in 1892. This had two roles. One was the training of teachers for her PNEU schools; the other was the training of parents or nannies and governesses, who were educating children at home. (Redeemer University College, n.d.; Living Books, n.d.) Mason’s philosophies had a significant influence on many British schools and further abroad in the mid 1900s; however her methods eventually faded from popularity with British authorities because of their Christian emphasis.

With the advent of radio, education departments in Australia began experimenting with delivering ‘master classes’ (a special topic class delivered by an expert) via radio, supplementary to the school programme (Distance Education, n.d.). One example of this was the ‘Let’s Sing’ radio programme, beamed into all Australian public primary schools from 1950 to 1990 (Let’s Sing, n.d.). In 1951 the world’s first ‘School of the Air’ opened at the Flying Doctor Service in Alice Springs to provide an entire school programme for isolated children on outback properties (Advertiser, 1951).

The 1960’s counterculture movement resulted in many people beginning to question every area of culture that was based on institutional traditions and ideals. One such questioner of the established methods of education was John Holt, a school teacher who began to seriously assess the effectiveness of his own teaching and that of his colleagues in the late 1950s. The book ‘How Children Fail’ is a diary of journal entries analysing effective and ineffective teaching and behaviour management strategies used in schools. First published in 1964, the book ‘initiated an international debate on educational reform’ (Holt 1982). Through the late 1970s-1980s Holt became a leading spokesman for the ‘contemporary homeschooling movement’ (Holt, 1982). ‘Contemporary homeschooling’ is used here to name the phenomenon of parents themselves taking on the full role and responsibility for educating their own children, ‘by choice’, as distinct from the ‘correspondence’ courses and ‘school of the air’ which people did out of necessity, and distinct from the ‘tutors, and governesses’ in middle to upper class England.

Perhaps also a result of earlier counterculture questioning of mainstream ideas and all things institutional there began, during the 1980s, an influx of Christian churches establishing private schools. Some of these schools developed curricular resources that could be used by homeschoolers. The school suppliers who jumped on the homeschool bandwagon included ‘Accelerated Christian Education’ (ACE), ‘Bob Jones University Press’, ‘A-Beka Books’, ‘Rod and Staff’, and ‘Alpha Omega’. These self-tutorial workbooks and textbooks usually taught content directly to the student so the parent could confidently educate at home without having to be an expert in every subject (McNeice, 1996, section 4.3).

Between 1981 and 1994, Dr. Raymond Moore wrote a number of books with hints and tips on how to successfully educate children at home, relaying stories of what homeschoolers were doing and achieving, and also exposing the persecution they often faced. Holt and Moore offered legal aid in the US, appearing in court in defence of homeschoolers. After Moore’s visit to Australia in 1989 to assist with lobbying for fairer education laws in NSW, Bruce McNeice spoke with Moore and trained from his books and research articles in order to establish a homeschool legal advocacy service for Australians. This service operates to the present day (McNeice, 2014).

During the 1980s-1990s, most homeschoolers were, what might be termed, ‘conscientious objectors’. Even if there was a legalised option to be registered with the government, the majority of homeschoolers were wary of the potential for over-regulation. They had, after all, left ‘the system’ either because something was not working for their children, or they wanted a different philosophy and culture than the school was able to deliver (McNeice, 1995).

In 1984, Susan Schaeffer Macaulay, who because of a childhood illness had been educated at home by her parents using Calvert Correspondence, wrote an inspirational book that re-popularised the work of Charlotte Mason (Schaeffer-Macaulay, 1984). A number of websites (eg. [www.amblesideonline.org](http://www.amblesideonline.org/)) and authors such as Catherine Levison and Dianne Lopez explored the purity and simple humaneness of Mason’s ideas, giving examples of how to put the ‘Charlotte Mason Method’ into practice in the home.

Over the next few decades the numbers of families choosing the homeschooling alternative rose by 10% per year (Harding, 1995; McNeice, 2014). During this time there were various government reviews of the homeschooling phenomenon in all States of Australia, which affected the Education Acts and the regulation of homeschooling. An extensive review by the Queensland Education Department was conducted during 2002-2003. Public meetings were held with hundreds of homeschool families around the State. As well as the parents surveyed at the public meetings, thousands of homeschool parents, students and other stakeholders presented submissions answering survey questions, and addressing issues. Furthermore, an Australian and international study of academic research was conducted, including standardised testing and literature reviews. Results were published in the ‘Homeschool Review Report’ in October, 2003. The report totally debunked and laid to rest three popular myths regarding concerns about the effectiveness and safety of homeschooling.

i) Socialisation: The studies found that “homeschooled children are as well socialised as students educated in traditional schools”.  
ii) Quality of Education. A number of studies showed significantly higher academic results among homeschoolers. In summary, they found “there is no research evidence to suggest that homeschooled children perform in ways that are educationally inferior to their peers in school”…and they found that “children whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to achieve academically”.

iii) Child Abuse: There was a concern that isolated homeschooled children could be more at risk of child abuse than their schooled peers. This myth also was statistically shown to be false.  
(Qld Education Department, 2003, p. 6)

With the introduction of the new Queensland Education Act in 2006, the homeschool community realised that the government had not expected a positive outcome from such an unregulated industry. It became obvious that with or without the Homeschool Review, the government had already planned further ways to monitor and regulate the homeschoolers. Despite receiving overwhelmingly positive findings from their research, and finding there was actually no problem to fix, the government still enacted harsher fines for non-registered homeschoolers, regular monitoring and reporting of student outcomes that placed an unwelcome administrative burden on the already busy parents, and then made it illegal to operate an unregistered educational entity supporting homeschoolers. It seems that the government simply ignored the results of the consultation and review process, and decided to implement measures which further alienated homeschooling families.

Conclusion:

This paper has explored both the historical context and the ideologies and events that have contributed to the growth of the contemporary homeschooling movement. Homeschooling has been both a reaction to unsatisfactory conditions within the normal school system, and an ideologically motivated search for a rich learning environment. Ultimately, it has been about parents exercising their right to ensure a better educational and moral learning environment for their children. We have seen that at the start of compulsory schooling, the governing power brokers displayed manipulative agendas with particular ideological standpoints antagonistic to Christianity, democratic freedoms, and the welfare of children. Unfortunately, in over a century, and in spite of evidence revealing the effectiveness of home-education, government education departments continue to drive the same agenda. By the evidence of the rise in the exodus of families from the school system, a growing number of parents believe that home-education is their only viable alternative to a flawed traditional schooling system.

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