

The experiences of mothers home educating their children with autism spectrum disorder

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The number of families choosing to home educate their children with disabilities, including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), has increased in Australia in recent years, however our knowledge about parent's experience of implementing such programmes is limited. This qualitative study was designed to explore mothers' perspectives of home educating a child with ASD. Ten mothers were interviewed using a qualitative research design within a phenomenological framework. A thematic content analysis identified three main themes; 'school experience', 'coming home' and 'mother's experience as educator'. Mothers commented that educating their child at home lead to improvements in their child's behavioural and psychological well-being. The experience of home educating was influenced by the children's school experiences, parents' perceived choice to home educate and level of educative and social support available. This study has implications for parents, educators and health care professionals regarding the psychological and educational needs of children with ASD.

Introduction

Within Australia the diagnosis rate of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) has risen over the past decade (Leonard et al., 2010; Prior, 2003). In Western Australia it has been reported that the rate of ASD in school age children is 64 children per 10,000 primary aged students, and for high school children, 79 per 10,000 (Buckley & Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia, 2006). The development of inclusive schooling over the past two decades (Leach & Duffy, 2009; Renzaglia, Karvonen, Drasgow, & Stoxen, 2003; Seach, Lloyd, & Preston, 2005), has meant that children with special needs, such as ASD can often access education in mainstream schools (Frederickson, Jones, & Lang, 2010; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008b). However students with ASD have often been reported to be some of the most challenging to include in regular classroom settings among children with disabilities (Barnard, Prior, & Potter, 2000; Down & Paine, 1998; Leach & Duffy, 2009). Parents have reported concerns with individualised attention and support available for their children in mainstream classrooms (Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Starr, Foy, & Cramer, 2001). In response to such concerns some parents have chosen to educate their children with ASD at home, an option which can be beneficial to individuals with ASD (Attwood, 2006). Unfortunately, despite the development of home education research in areas of academic achievement, socialisation and even that pertaining to children with special needs (e.g., intellectual impairments), the impact of this educative option for children with ASD and their parents remains under explored. The present study attempts to provide an account of the experience of home education for mothers who choose to educate their child with ASD at home.

Autism and educating children with ASD

The term Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) covers diagnostic labels which include Autistic Disorder, High Functioning Autism, Asperger's Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) characterises these disorders according to the degree of impairment that the child experiences with respect to communication skills, social interaction and stereotyped patterns of behaviour. While children with ASD all share difficulties with social and communicative symptoms, individual presentation can vary considerably due to the severity of symptoms and level of functioning (Mesibov & Shea, 2005). These within-individual variables can have a significant effect on each child's psycho-social well-being and the educative difficulties they may encounter at school (Jordan, 2005).

Children with ASD demonstrate cognitive or theory of mind deficits, i.e., there is an inability to understand the motives that underlie human action, communication, and social relationships (Baron-Cohen, 1989). There also exists a propensity to build knowledge in a detail- focused way which impacts on learning style and interests (Frith & Happe, 2004). Furthermore proponents of an executive dysfunction model of ASD (e.g., Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a) argue that education environments are challenging for ASD children as they have an inability to shift between activities or mental states and planning, and have problems with storing information and performing mental operations. These cognitive skills, as highlighted in different cognitive models of ASD, are paramount for learning and disruptions to these basic cognitive operations can make the classroom a challenging place for the child (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008b; Jordan, 2005).

Even though children and adolescents with ASD experience cognitive and social difficulties they have readily been included in mainstream classes with their 'typically' developing peers (Eaves & Ho, 1997; Leach & Duffy, 2009; Leblanc, Richardson, & Burns, 2009) for some period of time, however the efficacy and appropriateness of this approach has emerged as an issue for teachers, students and parents in both past and recent studies (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008b; Jordan, 2005; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Simpson deBoer, Smith-Myles, 2003). Specifically for teachers the unique cognitive profile and preferred learning style of students with ASD creates challenges in the learning environment. Consequently in order to provide effective inclusive education programmes, support (e.g., from school management, school psychologists, and special education teachers) and additional training or professional development about evidence based teaching practices is required (Frederickson, Jones, Lang, 2010; Harding, 2009; Humphrey & Lewis, 2009b; Jordan, 2005; Leblanc et al., 2009).

For students with ASD, evidence exists pointing to the inclusive school experience as being potentially stressful and anxiety-provoking even though the facilitation of learning and participation is encouraged (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a,b; Lynch & Irvine, 2009). Academically, for high-functioning students with ASD in particular, adequate educational support may prove difficult to obtain

since their cognitive strengths may mask other fundamental deficits (Carrington & Graham, 2001). Socially, isolation and loneliness are common for children with ASD at school, and they are more likely to experience bullying (Attwood, 2006; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a,b). Furthermore parents of children with ASD frequently report concern about their child's experience of school and the often limited individualised attention their children receive as a part of inclusive schooling (Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003; Starr et al., 2000; Stoner, Jones, Bock, Thompson, & Angell, 2005).

Home education

In an attempt to attend to the individual needs of the child and possibly to regain an element of control and governance in their child's education (Arora, 2006; Duffey, 2002; McDowell, 2000; Parsons & Lewis, 2010), parents are turning to an alternative teaching approach namely home education. This shift has been observed in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and more recently Australia (Arora, 2006; Duvall, Delquadri, Ward, & Greenwood, 1997; Reilly, Chapman, & O'Donoghue, 2002). In fact home education has an estimated annual growth rate between 20 to 30 percent in Australia (McNiece, 2001) and unlike some places in the world home education is legally recognised in every state of Australia (Arora, 2006; Reilly et al., 2002).

In home education the parent(s) facilitate their child's learning, usually from a home base, and assume primary responsibility for their child's educational programme (Jacob, 1991). The demographic background of families who decide to home educate children is varied with respect to their economic status, educational background, and prior professional experience (Arora, 2006). However mothers have tended to assume the role of primary educators and are over represented in the research literature on home education (Parsons & Lewis, 2010; Reilly et al., 2002).

Past research conducted overseas and within Australia, has found that home educated students can academically outperform their classroom-schooled peers (Medlin, 2000; Ray, 1997; Thomas, 1998). Upon graduation from high school, those who were home educated have been found to closely parallel their public school counterparts, whether they pursue more formal education or enter the job market (Ray, 1997; Webb, 1989). In terms of socialisation, research has documented home educated students to be socially and emotionally well-adjusted with a sense of healthy self-esteem and self concept (Barratt-Peacock, 1997; Taylor, 1986; Thomas, 1998).

Whilst the literature on home education has grown steadily there exists relatively little, and somewhat dated, research examining the home education of children with special needs (Duffey, 2002; Duvall et al., 1997; Ensign, 2000; Reilly et al., 2002). Initially concern existed over parents lacking expertise and experience in teaching students with special education needs. These concerns however were soon overridden when home educated students with special needs were found to experience greater academic success than their peers with similar disabilities, who attend public schools (Blok, 2004; Duvall et al., 1997). To date, the only Australian study on home educating

children with disabilities has been conducted by Reilly et al. (2002). In this study West Australian parents outlined the reasons behind their decisions to home educate. These included both child related (e.g., negative socialisation and difficulty to progress academically), and school related concerns (e.g., time and resource issues for assisting the child with psychological and academic needs). However, consistent among all parents using the home based educative method, and in confirmation of other contemporary studies incorporating children with special needs and disabilities, (e.g., Duffey, 2002; Parsons & Lewis, 2010), was the benefit of flexibility and the ability to attend to individual learning needs which lead to enhanced social and academic progress for the child.

The present study

Research that has examined home education for children with special needs has tended to include as a portion of the study participants, families with children with ASD (e.g., Parsons & Lewis 2010; Reilly et al., 2002). To date there exists no study exploring this phenomenon exclusively for parents of children with ASD. Further research exploring home education of children in the Australian context is warranted. With the growth in literature pertaining to the challenge that mainstream teachers are experiencing in attempting to meet the needs of their students with ASD (Leach & Duffy, 2009; Leblanc Richardson & Burns., 2009; Starr et al., 2000; Stoner et al., 2005), it is possible that literature acquired from home educating parents could inform the psychological literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and needs of children with ASD relating to learning and education (Duffey, 2002). Such knowledge would complement the perspectives obtained from psychological and educational literature based on the educational experience of children with ASD in schools.

A qualitative perspective exploring the experience of mothers educating their children with ASD at home is paramount to gain detailed insight into this educational alternative. While home education is acknowledged as one educative choice, the perspectives of women who choose this alternative option can be useful in assisting other parents negotiate the issues associated with this decision. Mothers have been chosen for this study due to their relative frequency in providing home based education. Therefore, for the purpose of the present study the research question was *What is the experience of mothers home educating a child with autism spectrum disorder?*

Method

Research design

Qualitative research methodology has been utilised to clarify the personal narratives of parents of children with ASD and special needs (Midence & O'Neill, 1999; Parsons & Lewis, 2010). Fleishmann (2005) reports qualitative methodology to be effective in disclosing the personal perspectives of parents of children with autism. Accordingly, the present study, which is exploratory in nature employed a phenomenological

approach in order to capture the richness of the experience of mothers home educating their child, or children, with ASD (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Participants

Ten mothers of children with ASD residing in Perth, Western Australia, who were home educating participated in this study. The mothers' mean age was 42 years and ranged from 37 to 46 years of age. Eight of the mothers had children diagnosed with autism and two of the mothers had a child diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder. Only one child of all the participants was diagnosed with a borderline intellectual disability, the remaining children had not been diagnosed with any intellectual disability however some had co-existing speech difficulties or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). One mother was home educating two children with autism and another mother had two children with ASD but was only home educating one child. Four of the mothers additionally home educated other children who were not diagnosed with ASD. The age of the participants' children with ASD ranged from 8 to 14 years (mean age of 10 years).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were formulated utilising questions designed to elicit a rich description of the participants' experience (Breakwell, 1995). Three questions were formulated to guide the semi structured interview. These included: 'Can you tell me about your experience of home educating a child with an autism spectrum disorder?'; 'What led you to choose home education?' and 'Is home educating what you thought it would be?' However the structure of the interview was deliberately flexible to accommodate new information and to adapt to the actual experiences of the individual participants (Byrne, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through two Perth ASD home schooling email support groups and through the Home Based Learning Network (HBLN) newsletter. On receipt of expression of interest from participants an interview time was arranged. An information letter and consent form outlined ethical issues connected with the research, e.g., confidentiality and freedom to withdraw from the research. Audio taped interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. Following each interview the researcher recorded reflections and impressions in a journal to assist in analysis.

Data analysis and research rigour

Interviews were analysed utilising a content analysis. The interview transcripts were read a number of times and thematic content analysis techniques were employed to analyse the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The main themes and sub-themes were then derived from the content of the interviews. Research rigour was maintained by having both authors verify conclusions from the coding process and by checking the

accuracy of the conclusions by a number of study participants (Creswell, 2007; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Silverman, 1993).

Findings and interpretations

The aim of the present study was to explore the experiences of women who were home educating their child, or children, with ASD. A thematic content analysis yielded three major themes that best captured the phenomenon of home educating children with ASD. The themes also highlighted that for the majority of mothers there appeared to be a shared “journey” associated with the home education experience. Factors such as the cognitive challenges, stress experienced by the child and limited educational support informed parents’ decisions to home educate. Once the decision to home educate was made the experience of “coming home” for the child with ASD was generally associated with positive benefits for most children as they demonstrated improvements in their well-being and had their learning needs met in a variety of ways. However, against this the mother’s experience of home education emerged as a theme which captured both the mother’s perceived difficulties of fulfilling the role of educator and her beliefs about the benefits of assuming this role for the child. Three major themes, each incorporating three subthemes, emerged from the data (See Table 1). Pseudonyms are used in the quotes presented below.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes of mother’s experience of home educating the child with ASD

Themes	Sub themes
Impact of school experience	Cognitive challenges Anxiety and stress Teacher’s understanding of autism
Experience of coming home	Increased well-being Individual learning needs met Flexibility
Mother’s experience as educator	Multi-roles Forms of support Attitude or perspectives about home education

Impact of school experience

Consistent with previous research (Duffey, 2002; Parsons & Lewis, 2010; Reilly et al., 2002) relating to the reasons parents decide to home educate their children with special needs, all participants in the present study discussed the experiences their children had at school and attributed these to their decision to educate their child or children at home. Three main sub-themes arose here and included; cognitive and educational challenges associated with school, school stress and anxiety, educators understanding of ASD.

Cognitive challenges

Children with ASD have been found to process information differently compared to their neurotypical peers and consequently may benefit from alternative teaching practices than those offered in general education settings (Frith & Happe, 2004; Leach & Duffy, 2009). One of the main reasons behind mothers' decision to home educate was the discrepancy between the learning needs of the child and the learning programmes offered at school. Eight out of ten mothers discussed the atypical learning style of their child and the difficulty that they perceived the schools had in modifying the curriculum to meet the child's needs. In the words of Sally,

... they refused or were unable to modify the curriculum to suit the needs of an autistic child, um they say on an ad hoc basis they have some success with it but they don't because the kids learn by rote, computer, most of them want to work on a computer and work has to be closed sort of questions, any concept of imaginative work is really difficult for them... so when you ask someone to modify it they simplify it, they don't modify it.

Five of the mothers commented on their child 'falling through the cracks' or failing to progress academically. As Dana stated of her 14 year old son with high-functioning autism, upon withdrawing him from school,

... he couldn't write to save himself. To get something on paper was like trying to pull teeth. It would take hours to get a page of writing that he'd tell you, and that you'd transcribe for him.

In agreement with the literature (Frith & Happe, 2004; Jordan, 2005), mothers reported that because of their child's uneven cognitive profile, teachers would expect their child to understand or learn more than they were capable of. As Dawn articulated, "Because he could do certain things in academics, they expected more out of him ..."

Furthermore the behavioural inflexibility of these children was often not effectively catered for in the classroom. Dawn gave an example of her child with ASD having difficulty moving from one task to another.

... they didn't use a lot of visuals for him to tell him what was coming up next. Um, like he might be on the computer and if (he had) his regular aide, Christina, she'd say, "Luke you'll have a time of five minutes and you've got to stop that and come back to your worksheets". Whereas the other teacher would just (say), "Luke you've got to stop" and not give him a warning, and just turn the computer off on him while he is in the middle of something. So he always needs to finish what he's doing, so they would turn it off, so he would sit there and start screaming and throw himself on the floor and having a tantrum

Anxiety and stress

The experience of school has been documented as being a source of anxiety and stress for the child with ASD (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Parsons & Lewis, 2010). In the current study, nine of the ten mothers reported stress and anxiety as being major factors in withdrawing their child or children from school. In fact, two mothers were advised by psychologists to remove their children from school due to the level of anxiety the child was experiencing. Dana explained,

I guess for me I got into it because I was forced into it, it wasn't something that I did by choice ... the paediatrician recommend that he homeschool. Accordingly the psychs recommended that he never return to school, um so when I started homeschooling I was dealing with a really, really distressed boy, um, melting down left right and centre.

Prior to withdrawing their child from school, mothers discussed a common phenomenon, a stress reaction that their child experienced at the end of their school day. Nine out of ten mothers discussed how their child would come home from school and 'melt down'. Many attributed this reaction to the child 'holding it together' whilst at school. Sally described her experience.

... sometimes he'd come home from school and after he'd yelled and screamed and threw his bag and punched me he'd then go to bed and cry himself to sleep and sleep for 2 to 3 hours. And that often happened every day.

Not surprisingly, in addition to the child's anxiety, mothers also reported the stress that they felt in response to the child's school experience. Dawn indicated that the experience was "very stressful for the whole family", and Dana stated that she became frustrated with the school as they tended to implement ineffective behavioural educative practices "again, and again and again".

For some children the anxiety and stress was caused by bullying. In fact, six of the ten mothers reported that their child was subjected to bullying at school. These findings support studies which have reported that a high percentage of children with Asperger's Disorder are bullied (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; Little, 2002). Mothers in this study certainly attributed bullying to one of their reasons in deciding to home educate. As Linda explained,

... bullying started rearing its ugly head...so much so that I did actually come upon three boys; two were holding him down while the other kicked him. It was the worst day of my life ...

In addition, two of the ten mothers reported that their child engaged in self-harm and attributed this to the stress and anxiety encountered at school. Dawn explained, "he was frustrated and stressed and was starting to bite himself and self injure."

Teacher's understanding of autism

Many participants felt that their children's teachers and other education professionals had difficulty understanding ASD and consequently could not implement appropriate strategies that were needed to make the education placement successful. This particular concern was discussed by Sally and initiated her decision to home educate her son.

Because he was having meltdowns all the time and because they weren't managing his environment or modifying the curriculum to suit his needs, they were still trying to get him to write with a pencil, still trying to get him to play football games, still trying to get him to accept relief teachers without prior warning. All the things that set them off they continued to do and they had a behaviour management plan and there were consequences for his bad behaviour but they were not willing to change and it was always like, we'll cure him of this by giving him a string of consequences or punishing him... it makes no sense to Mark, it doesn't make any sense, he gets angry and upset because something doesn't work for him, for his brain, punishing him for that, he doesn't really even know why he's been punished.

Such comments provide support for the findings that many teachers are perplexed by ASD (Starr et al., 2001) and that effective behavioural strategies that are beneficial for children do not get implemented consistently in educational contexts (Leblanc et al., 2009; Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, & Goodwin, 2003).

The experience of coming home

Parents' decisions to home educate children with ASD is usually informed by factors such as their child's educational needs and their social experiences at school (Parsons & Lewis, 2010; Reilly et al., 2002). Home education although challenging for parents generally, can lead to improvements in the child's academic achievement and their psychosocial well-being (Duffey, 2002). Improvements in well-being, meeting the child's unique educational needs and flexibility in the educative process were noted by mothers in this current study.

Increased well-being

Research on home education has found home educated students demonstrate a healthy self esteem (Barratt-Peacock, 1991) and self concept (Taylor, 1986). Similar to these findings, the majority of mothers in this study asserted that their child experienced less stress and anxiety once they were home educated. Many mothers reported that their child additionally demonstrated an increase in confidence and social skills, as well as feelings of happiness. For example, in discussing her son's well-being, Sally asserted, "... anxiety is less because he's at home ... not being bullied ... he's happier at home."

Sondra discussed her son's well-being in comparison to the self harm he exhibited when he was attending school.

Um self harm was an issue. He used to hit himself in the head ... that's a behaviour that's completely gone now... He's heaps less stressed...I mean he comes up to me all the time and just gives me a hug and goes, I just love you mum you know and I'm like well I just love you too matey, you know so he's really happy.

Since home educating her son, Linda stated, "It's just a really happy, thriving boy who ... has left a lot of autistic traits behind."

An increase in confidence was apparent in many of the children after beginning home education. Linda described the changes in her son as follows.

Yes, well we've just seen him blossom...I knew that we could do better than school in terms of his academic progress but to see him blossom as a person, that's come as a big surprise.

Home educated students have frequently been documented in the literature as being socially well-adjusted (Barratt-Peacock, 1997; Thomas, 1998). The improvement in social skills once home educated was found by Duffey (2002), similarly, a number of mothers in this study discussed the development in their own child's social skills. Dana stated,

I was astounded at how much better his social skills were within weeks of leaving school. That just astounded me, um, everybody said that these kids have got to be at school for them to learn social skills, to be able to get on with other people, and my experience is that this is a load of hogwash.

Individual learning needs met

The mother's ability to meet her child's learning needs at home was the most frequently mentioned issue in all interviews. Consistent with the findings from other studies (Duvall et al., 1997; Parsons & Lewis, 2010; Reilly et al., 2002), all participants discussed the ability they have in being able to provide their child with an education that is suited to the way in which they learn. In addition, mothers discussed their ability to control their child's environment in order to enable learning to take place. Kelly indicated, "We've been able to reduce a lot of the issues that were preventing them from learning ..."

The progress mothers observed with respect to the amount of work their children accomplish, combined with academic growth, fits with current literature that reports that children with special needs can make academic gains alongside and above their school-educated peers (Duvall et al., 1997). Sally stated,

The amount of work that I've been able to get him to do...the volume of work I've been able to get him to do is substantial compared to what he ever did at school.

In addition Dana, who earlier discussed the extensive challenges her 14 year old son had in writing when he initially commenced home education, explained, "I taught him how to type...and so he's now written about five books."

Flexibility

The ability to incorporate flexibility and solitude time was seen as an important benefit to participants, in terms of well-being and learning. With respect to flexibility and well-being, taking time out (solitary time) throughout the day or week was regarded as important. Gale explained, "If I see that that he's getting stressed, I can send him off, and he can have his downtime, which they don't get at school."

Likewise, Kelly found her children with ASD needed breaks in between formal learning.

You know we'll do something and they'll go up and swing in their hammocks and their hammock chairs or bounce on the trampoline, um we have lots of breaks.

Secondly, mothers reported that they were able to be flexible in resourcing learning material that met the individual learning needs of their child. For example, if one type of learning material was not working then a more suitable resource was obtained. This however, was a challenge for some mothers. Gale stated, "Um, I think the biggest challenge is, apart from keeping him focused, is um, getting material which will keep him engaged."

Kelly explained that resourcing appropriate learning materials takes time. "... I have to do a lot of research on what will work with them ... that is time consuming."

While some challenges presented themselves to mothers in terms of resource allocation and child compliance, the benefits of home education as perceived by mothers were frequently reported.

Mother's experience as educator

Research has documented that the major stressors for mothers who home educate their children are related to the dual roles of housework and being an educator. The role of an educator is accompanied by concern about children learning necessary and appropriate material for their well-being (McDowell, 2000). While these findings have been observed in home education literature generally, they were also observed in this study. Many of the mothers in the present study discussed their multifaceted role, as well as concerns over their child's future academic outcomes.

Multi-roles

The majority of the mothers in this study highlighted the juggling of roles required of them. Typically mothers tended to reflect on the complexity of being an educator,

mother and one who oversees the day to day running of the household, as Kelly explained, " ... trying to marry home schooling and all the other things that I'm supposed to be doing as mother, cook, laundress, blah, blah cleaner ..."

Additionally, Sally also captured the complex position home educating parents could find themselves in when educating children with complex psychological and educational needs.

... it's tough on me to both have to manage and teach him to manage his anxiety, manage his disability, look after him as a mother and educate him, that's one hell of a job ...

Forms of support

Support or lack thereof was expressed in terms of educational support, social support and financial support. Whilst some mothers said that they did not need educational support to help them with home education, others had tried to attain it, often to no avail. Those who indicated that they needed the support were more likely to be the mothers who were not given a choice to home educate. Dana explained,

... looking at it from a teaching point of view. If you are a teacher in a school, at recess and at lunchtime you get together with the other teachers and can say, 'I'm having a problem here' or 'where could I find ...?' So there is a huge amount of support in the school situation that you don't have as a homeschooler... I've needed it, it's not available. Um, I need it now. I keep ringing up and saying 'help me, help me!'

Not only did there not seem to be any effective help in terms of educative support for the mothers, but social support, such as home schooling groups, were also a challenging resource to become part of, with some mothers attributing this to having a child with ASD. For example, Gale perceived that the home education community would be more accepting of a child with ASD.

I've been a bit naïve, I think...assuming that the homeschooling community would be different to the overall community. It's not, it's exactly the same, in fact, it's worse.

Similarly Sally commented,

I want support, I need support but it's finding it. I know there are homeschooling groups. Liam has such social problems that he would be uncomfortable and disruptive and the other parents may not be accepting of him.

For some mothers, a lack of support meant that they were unable to have time away from their children. Certainly it may be that time out for mothers who home educate their child with ASD is more difficult to attain than for home educating mothers

generally. This may be due to the high needs their child presents with, as well as the child's need for familiarity of caregivers. Dana stated, "I have no time out. ...I can't use respite because my kids can't tolerate strangers in the house, and I have no partner to support me."

Of interest, not all mothers voiced needing time away or 'time out' from their child. In fact, mothers who felt they had no choice but to home educate their child voiced needing more support in comparison to mothers who felt they had actively chosen this educative alternative.

In addition, many participants commented on the financial cost of home educating. This assertion has been supported by other studies based in Australia and the United Kingdom (Parsons & Lewis, 2010; Reilly et al., 2002). In reference to the financial outlay for home educating Dana stated, "... Huge, huge financial costs ..."

Attitude or perspectives about home education

There seemed to be two perspectives about home education, and these tended to relate to whether the mother had chosen to home educate her child or whether she had been advised to by a health professional. Consistent with McDowell's (2000) finding, mothers who felt 'forced' into home education viewed the experience in a more negative way. It may well be that mothers in this study who perceived a lack of control in educating their child, experienced a loss of power and were resistant to their role as educator. Sally stated, "It's hard for me because I don't want to be at home."

Dana expressed how her life could have been. "... but it's also a lot more pressure on me...I could have had a life and had a job, or completed my studies ..."

Eight of the ten mothers however, felt positive about home educating their child or children. These women felt they had made the decision to home educate their child and as such expressed an emergent sense of power and control over their situation compared to when their child attended school. This finding, which reflects Duffey's (2002) research, was evident for Linda.

I think it's more than what I thought. When people say "Oh it must be so hard" I go "No it's a piece of cake compared to the futile fights I was wasting my time on with school". I've realised I've done a 360 degree and all that effort has been put into something so positive, I think it's more than I could ever have hoped for.

Some mothers constructed the home education experience to be a personal journey for them. This was depicted by Kelly.

... it's actually learning about ourselves and what we're capable of and what we're not capable of, looking at our strengths and our weaknesses and how then we can use that for our kids and that's what I think home schooling is all about.

For a number of mothers, one of the outcomes of home education has been the strengthening of family bonds. This was discussed by Duffey (2002) who reported that mothers were able to 'get their child back' and keep their family together (p.10). Dawn explains how it has affected her relationship with her son, "It's spending that time and I think just getting that closeness back with your child too ... Sometimes I felt that that was being lost a bit too."

And regarding the effect on her family, she said, "The whole family is a lot happier, with the family like a unit as well."

Overall here, if mothers felt they had control over the decision to home educate their child they were quite positive about the experience, and often about their own journey, as well as their role as educator. Families too were seen to be strengthened through the experience of home education.

Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to explore the experiences of mothers who are home educating their child, or children, with ASD. Utilising a phenomenological approach, it was found that the experience of home education was generally a positive journey for the majority of mothers in this study, and this was for many, related to their child's progress, in terms of learning and well-being. The reasons for mothers deciding to home educate in this study were compatible with those endorsed by mothers home educating children with special needs generally (Arora, 2006; Duffey, 2002; Parsons & Lewis, 2010; Reilly et al., 2002). Specifically, limited school resources (e.g., availability of specialised staff and individual instruction) and consequently the ability of the school to be able to meet the children's unique educational needs were reported as reasons. Mothers in this current study also reported that the school environment was a considerable source of anxiety for their child, a finding which is congruent with the growing research on ASD and inclusive schooling (Carrington & Graham, 2001; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a,b; Stoner et al., 2005). Furthermore, and consistent with Spann et al. (2003), it was not unusual for mothers to report their own feelings of stress as a result of the difficulties their child experienced at school. The stress of the child was often carried over into the home and impacted negatively on the entire family.

Mothers perceived that their children progressed academically and also experienced enhanced psychological well-being in response to home education (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Duvall et al., 1997). Academic progress was achieved through the use of individualised tuition, modified teaching strategies and flexibility (Parsons & Lewis, 2010). Consistent with other studies improvements in confidence and social skills were also observed by the mothers (Jacob, 1991; Thomas, 1998), suggesting that home education provides adequate opportunity for socialising children (Duffey, 2002). Potentially, home education may be reducing anxiety and allowing the consolidation of positive social skills for children, particularly those with ASD, who have numerous challenges in the area of socialisation (Eaves & Ho, 1997).

While much of the satisfaction associated with home educating appeared to be related to the child's increased well-being, a decline in mothers stress and increased family time were also potential contributors. It therefore appears that this educative approach can enhance connectedness to the child with ASD and strengthen family cohesion (Duffey, 2002). In fact the potential benefits of home education for the child and family coupled with mother's belief in the efficacy of home education prompted five of the mothers to extend their home education programme to other children in the family.

However, the interviews also revealed that there were some mothers who felt they did not have a choice in home educating their child and this perception of lack of choice impacted on their experience of home educating. While they were very satisfied with their child's academic progress and increased well-being they tended to perceive their role as home educator in a more negative way and to resent it. This apparent feeling of being 'forced' to home educate their child, diminished the mothers sense of control (McDowell, 2000) and it was noticeable that they voiced the need for considerably more support. In comparison, mothers who felt they had chosen their role often constructed their identity around it, felt a sense of empowerment and were more likely to home educate other children. Here, exerting control over their child's education may certainly attribute to their positive outlook in regards to their role as home educator.

Implications

The research described in this study has valuable implications for practice and intervention deriving from the analysis of mothers' reports on home educating their child with ASD. This research has provided insight from 10 home educating mothers whose experience with their child's educational journey may or may not be typical of the larger population of students with ASD. However, the commonalities of these findings with those from related studies (e.g., Carrington & Graham, 2001; Reilly et al., 2002), together with the findings from the limited number of studies on home based education (Parsons & Lewis, 2010) tend to suggest that educational practices for children with ASD utilised in both school and at home need to be addressed (Frederickson et al., 2010). At this point in time there appears to be a view held by parents included in this study that teachers and educational professionals have limited awareness of the needs of children with autism, and further input to expand educators' knowledge so that they can effectively provide optimum learning environments for children with ASD through recognising the cognitive and psychological needs of these children would be beneficial (Frederickson et al, 2010; Leblanc et al., 2009; Lynch & Irvine, 2009). A further implication of this research is that parents of children with ASD may benefit from being made aware of home education, and that the stories and experience of mothers home educating may assist other families decide whether to home educate. Finally, the findings from this study may help enhance the knowledge of health professionals who work in the field of ASD, of the benefits and challenges of home educating children with ASD. Knowledge about the academic and social benefits for the child, mother and family can be helpful when working with parents contemplating this educative process.

Future research

The present study has contributed to the research investigating the psychological impact of home educating children with ASD. Future research could employ a mixed method design incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methodology in order to allow for generalisation. Indeed this study provides a conceptual framework to guide a more detailed exploration of home educating children with ASD and suggests a platform for the cognitive theories of ASD to be investigated in relation to their impact on learning and education. Whilst the perspective of the mothers has been extremely insightful, the perspectives of children and adolescents with ASD who are home educated could provide additional information to be better able to isolate the characteristics of home education that are seen to lead to positive outcomes for these children.

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