

## Article

# Is a Whole School Approach to Inclusion Really Meeting the Needs of All Learners? Home-Schooling Parents' Perceptions

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**Abstract:** This paper examines issues impacting parental choice for home-schooling in one state in Australia. Data were collected from 99 parents home-schooling at least one child during the 2022 academic year. Utilizing the newly developed Parent Perceptions of Home-Schooling scale, consideration was given to proactive and reactive reasons perceived by parents as impacting their decision-making. Proactive reasons consisting of philosophical beliefs and needs of the child were cited more frequently by parents who had always home-schooled their child. Reactive reasons were mostly employed to confirm parent decisions to remove a child from school due to concerns regarding the school, the child, and the needs of parents. A range of school, child, and parental issues, and different child needs were identified as impetus for home-schooling learners with and without a diagnosed disability or an additional learning need. Discussion centers around whether current whole school approaches to inclusion are addressing the needs of all learners and parents, as perceived by this cohort. By gaining a better understanding of parental reasons for withdrawing their children with specific educational needs from regular schooling, this study is significant as it highlights a range of pertinent school-based issues to be considered to ensure effective inclusion for all.

**Keywords:** whole school approach; inclusion; parents; parent perceptions of home-schooling scale; disability; additional learning needs (ADL); specific educational needs



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## 1. Introduction

There has been strong movement internationally towards inclusive education over the last several decades [1]. As part of this movement, researchers and practitioners have examined the structures and practices of schools to attempt to determine the most appropriate environment and pedagogies to support the needs of all learners. This examination has resulted in a range of approaches being adopted by systems and schools to ensure that the needs of all learners are being met [2]. In many regions, this has meant the structure of schooling has changed with the promotion of a strong move away from the placement of learners with specific educational needs in segregated schools, to including them within their local mainstream school [3]. Consequently, it is widely acknowledged that the diversity of learner needs within mainstream schools has increased significantly [4]. In many instances, learner needs have become very complex, and schools have reported the increasing number of challenges they are facing when endeavoring to provide a fully inclusive practice for all learners [5,6].

### 1.1. Inclusive Education

When considering the implementation of what tends to be generalized under the banner of 'inclusion', several significant issues arise. Without any regulated definition of inclusion internationally, and often an enormous variety of understanding within countries, policies to inform inclusive educational practices and local interpretations of them may vary

quite dramatically [7]. With inclusion being seen in Australia as multifaceted, incorporating a holistic approach, there are national core values which emphasize presence, participation, and achievement for all children and youth [1]. Nevertheless, within Australia, each of the eight states and territories are autonomous in their educational policy, thus leading to no uniform provision of how inclusive education is enacted or supported [8,9]. There is, however, some federal funding for states which is allocated according to the level of support needed to include any child who has been formally identified with a disability. This funding is regulated through the *Nationally Consistent Collection of Data* (NCCD) (nccd.edu.au).

Within education in Australia, there are three distinct systems, consisting of government, Catholic, and independent schools. Both government and Catholic schools are operated under a state-wide coordinating body. Independent schools do not have an overarching education body and act individually. Across all three systems, a range of schooling options may be offered from full inclusion into a mainstream classroom, inclusion on the site of a mainstream school but in a separate classroom or centre for some or all of the school day, or placement in a segregated special school (government system only). While parents have been increasingly consulted regarding preferred placement options, the final decision for government schools remains with the state-based education departments, and for Catholic and independent schools, with individual schools. Including all students in the life of the school through a whole school approach should, theoretically, support the needs of all students. Such an approach aligns closely with the principles of the holistic approach promoted in Australia. In the 10-year national workforce strategy for Western Australian education, published in 2021 [10], it is proposed that a support team will be established if a child is diagnosed with a learning disability. This holistic approach should include the parent(s), school staff and service providers as necessary. Support services are to be determined collaboratively to ensure the best education and support is available to meet a child's unique needs. Additional behavioral support is also available to parents through the National Disability Insurance Scheme that was implemented in 2013 for learners formally identified with a disability [11].

A holistic approach also requires that teachers feel confident and have the skills to be able to cater for the needs of all learners within increasingly diverse classrooms [12]. It has been found that this approach to inclusion may support learners with special needs by addressing some of the disadvantages experienced by them that may lead to issues such as school drop-out and disengagement and in enhancing feelings of belonging and acceptance [13,14]. In addition to supporting the development of students with disabilities and those experiencing disadvantage, a holistic approach to inclusion can also result in increased benefit for all learners, including developing meaningful friendships, acceptance of difference and diversity, and preparation for an inclusive society [15,16].

Within the holistic Australian model, in-school support takes a pre-emptive approach in providing multi-tiered structures to address the needs of students in the areas of academic development, behavior, or social interactions [17–19]. Whilst a whole school approach would appear to be a logical and practical approach to supporting the needs of all students, there are some challenges in implementation for this method. All teaching staff and general staff in the school must be on board with the approach and have appropriate training and support to implement any modifications to the environment and curriculum that are required to support all students [12]. While the challenges may be evident, it is important that schools taking this approach work diligently to ensure that all parties are included and have a role in helping all learners to thrive.

### 1.2. Home-Schooling

Although much of the recent literature around home-schooling is concerned with schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic [20,21], home-schooling or home education has been evident since the 1970s, even though there has been a significant increase since 2020 [22], and has also been seen in a variety of modes, variously supported by legislation and policy. Home-schooling, or home education, refers to the practice of providing

education to children within their home environment, rather than a formal school institution [23]. The type of education provided can be structured, unstructured (sometimes called unschooling), or a combination of these approaches, with differences in the way content and pedagogy are defined [24,25]. In some cases, home-schooling is combined with traditional schooling, where the student attends a mainstream school for some of their education and is home-schooled for the remainder.

The geolocation of the student impacts on the legislation or regulations that must be addressed when considering home-schooling [26], with it being illegal in some countries (e.g., Germany, Spain, Portugal, Brazil) and very much accepted in others (e.g., Australia, France, the USA, Finland, Ireland, the UK). The legislation varies greatly regarding required education for learners, with broad terms used in some instances (i.e., the UK simply states that the child must have an education, with no specific information as to where or how), and is very prescriptive in other cases (i.e., in Austria, there are strict conditions around home-schooling). In some countries, such as the USA, individual states or territories have varying legislation regarding home-schooling [27], which can be difficult if families move between jurisdictions often for employment or other reasons. In Australia, children need to be either in school, or to be home-schooled between the ages of 5 and 17 years [28]. Education authorities in each Australian State and Territory recognize home-schooling as an alternative to the classroom and require that parents are registered with the state education authority [29].

Throughout the past decade, researchers have identified an increasing upward trend in the number of parents choosing to home-school their children, which was evident even before the COVID-19 pandemic but has seen a continued acceleration in recent years [23]. There is also an increasing diversity in people who chose to home-school their children, often in response to their beliefs (ideology, religion), and/or social factors (class, ethnicity) [26]. Dissatisfaction with traditional schooling is increasingly cited as a reason for choosing home-schooling for learners with disability or additional learning needs (ALN). Concerns include issues about safety, lack of religious grounding, behavior problems, lack of support for students with disabilities, lack of high-quality outcomes, or simply not meeting the educational and/or social needs of the student [29]. Often it is a combination of reasons that lead parents to search for alternative ways to educate their children. Decisions for home-schooling, however, are very context specific.

In the UK, responses from a survey by 134 Welsh home-schooling parents revealed that almost one third of parents were educating a learner with specific educational needs, including those with a disability [30]. Decisions to home-school were mainly reactive, based upon perceptions that the school focused too heavily on assessment and attainment with insufficient support for their child. Parents further reported that a lack of understanding about their child's specific needs by the school led to increased anxiety. Similar results were reported by a US study of parents home-schooling 309 children, where 60% had a special learning need [31]. Approximately half of them had been withdrawn from school as parents perceived their specific learning needs were not being met, and that they wanted to be more involved in their child's education.

Across all jurisdictions in Australia, in 2018, there were approximately 20,000 registered home educated learners [32] and the trend towards home-schooling was seen to be increasing [29]. From analysing government data from Western Australia between 2017 and 2021 [10], the increasing trend for home-schooling learners is evident. The actual number of students registered as being home-schooled increased from 3064 in 2017 to 4562 in 2021. By comparing these data to the increase in the number of students enrolled in public schools across the same time frame, it was possible to calculate the relative percentage increase in students being home-schooled. In Table 1, it can be seen that the overall increase in home-schooling across the five years is dramatic. Compared to the 5.41% increase in public schools, there was a five-fold increase in home-schooling. Much of this increase occurred between the latter years from 2019 to 2021. Although these years incorporated the need for off-site schooling during COVID outbreaks, these figures only include families who

formally registered for home-schooling, and not those who were required to keep their children at home during interim periods. In WA, unlike some other jurisdictions in Australia, schools mainly remained open during the pandemic with only very minimal closures.

**Table 1.** Increase in home-schooling in WA from 2017 to 2021.

Years	Public School Increase	Home-Schooling Increase
2017–2021 (5 years)	5.41%	24%
2017–2019 (3 years)	2.86%	6.88%
2019–2021 (3 years)	2.60%	18%

### 1.3. Summary

Inclusive education has transitioned in most regions over the past three decades from a focus on modifying or differentiating the curriculum just for learners with a disability, to a wider perspective [33]. This broadening of inclusive education has increased expectations for a more encompassing approach to supporting all learners with a diverse range of needs. In addition, inclusion has moved drastically from a medical model view to a social one that focuses on the context of learning as it aligns with individual needs [34]. As countries increasingly adopt international conventions and aim to meet the proposed expectations, there has been a shift in focus from disability orientation to one of social justice, and most recently, one of equity [5]. This approach has led to a reconceptualization of what it means to provide an inclusive education for all learners within a whole school approach. Many regions have implemented policies to support this change and have endeavored to upskill teachers to ensure the needs of all learners are being appropriately identified and met [35]. In Australia, considerable effort has been expended to implement effective inclusive practices that cater for all learners within a mainstream school. Governments have provided strong support through a range of system changes, new administrative approaches, and access to additional funding and support structures (see, for example, [1,10]).

Given the enormous improvement in inclusive practices, and the strong emphasis on a holistic approach in Australia, this research aimed to investigate the reasons why, at the same time, there has been an increasing number of families choosing to remove their children from formal schooling and undertake home-schooling. Of particular interest is whether these reasons vary for learners in Western Australia with a formally identified disability or an alternative learning need, compared to those without an identified specific need, as identified by the parents.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Instrumentation

By utilizing the first part of the Parent Perceptions of Home Schooling (PPHS) scale (under review), data were collected from 99 parents choosing to home-school their child in Western Australia in 2022. The items in the scale were developed by classifying them according to the binary framework proposed by Green-Hennessy and Mariotti [36]. Reasons were categorized as either proactive based on core family beliefs and philosophical reasons or reactive in response to perceived negative or unsuitable schooling. Two scales were developed to measure the impact of proactive issues on parental decision-making. These included philosophical issues (e.g., ideological, religious, family, and freedom to educate their child in a way that met their family's lifestyle) and the needs of the child (e.g., medical, behavioral, emotional issues, alternative curriculum, or pedagogy). Three scales were developed containing reactive school issues (e.g., school was inflexible, negative attitudes of staff, lack of support, or inclusion opportunities), reactive child issues (e.g., bullying, behavioral issues, truancy), and reactive parent issues (e.g., not involved in decision-making, stressed).

The questionnaire (see Supplementary File) contained a series of demographic and child-related questions and five Likert-type scales. The two proactive scales focused on

philosophical reasons and the needs of the child. The three reactive scales requested information about the degree to which parents indicated that school, child, and parent issues influenced their decisions to home-school. Each of the five scales allowed for a 0 'not applicable to me' response, and four responses from 1 (very little), 2 (somewhat), 3 (quite a lot), to 4 (a lot). As it was anticipated that some families were home-schooling more than one child, participants were asked to focus on just one child. The child was to be selected in order from a child with a formally diagnosed disability, or, with additional learning needs (ALN), or the eldest child being home-schooled. To consider any major differences between children with or without an identified special educational need (disability, ALN), further consideration was given to each item in the scales for this independent variable.

Individual items in the scales were considered for all responses. Total scale scores were then calculated to undertake one-way between subjects' ANOVAs using SPSS for each of six independent variables. These included geolocation (urban, rural), gender (male, female), identified child for responding (disability, ALN, eldest), school (mainstream, home), school type (government, independent, Catholic), and gifted (formal diagnosis, not gifted). At this stage, responses to 'not applicable to me' were recoded as missing data, giving a mean score from parents who indicated these were an issue for them, from 1 (very little) to 4 (a lot).

## 2.2. Participants

Participants were sought through various social media sites and invitations in local home-schooling groups. A link to a Qualtrics questionnaire was provided and participants were required to agree to participate before they were able to complete it. Ethics permission was received through a local university process; access to the site was open for two months at the end of 2022; and IP addresses were removed from the recorded data, ensuring that all data were anonymous.

## 3. Results

Geolocation data gave only three parents living in remote regions; thus, these were recoded to form an urban ( $n = 75$ ) vs. rural ( $n = 17$ ) independent variable. Of the cohort of children being home-schooled, 39 were girls and 51 were boys. Three parents reported that their child was non-binary, but as this was a very small number, these were removed from statistical analysis. The children selected by parents included 29 with a disability, 17 with ALN, and 45 as the eldest child being home-schooled. Of the cohort, 60 had been attending a mainstream school when the parents decided to home-school them, with 26 always being educated at home. Of the 60 children at school, 36 had specific needs and 24 were selected as being the eldest without specific learning needs. Of those who had been attending a school, 38 were at a government school, 16 were at an independent school, and 6 at a Catholic school. For those who had always been home-schooled, 8 had specific learning needs and 17 were the eldest. Additionally, 22 parents indicated that their child had been identified by a professional as being gifted and/or talented. Most of the parents were mothers ( $n = 91$ ). A total of 27 parents indicated that their highest level of education was secondary school, with the majority (65) holding a university degree, and 3 with a PhD. Not all categories totaled 99 due to missing data. Frequencies of data were considered for the whole cohort and for the six independent variables.

For the proactive scales, parents were asked to respond to the degree to which philosophical reasons ( $n = 15$  items) and the needs of the child ( $n = 19$  items) impacted on their decision to home-school. Parents indicated four philosophical reasons that had quite a lot of impact (Mean  $\geq 2.5$ ). Except for parents who said that this did not apply to them ( $n = 5$ ), the highest response to philosophical reasons was to 'I was not happy with mainstream schools' ( $n = 45$ ,  $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ). Similarly, 'I wanted greater parental involvement' ( $n = 57$ ,  $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ), 'I wanted my child to learn in their own style and develop naturally' ( $n = 48$ ,  $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), and 'my family learns together about things that matter/a way of life' ( $n = 63$ ,  $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) responses were high. These proactive issues were all considered to impact quite a lot on parental decision-making. Only four

parents indicated that they had been home-schooled themselves. None of the proactive needs of the child items were rated above having somewhat of an impact ( $M \leq 2.5$ ).

The three reactive type scales asked to what degree a range of issues associated with school ( $n = 9$  items), child ( $n = 9$  items) or parents ( $n = 5$  items) impacted parental decisions to home-school their child. Within the school issue scales, five items received a score above the medium ( $M \geq 2.5$ ), indicating quite a lot of impact. Across the other school issue scales, two child items and two parent items received a mean response of  $M > 2.5$ , which indicated quite a lot of impact (Table 2).

**Table 2.** School, child, and parent issues that were considered to impact quite a lot on parental decision making to home-school.

Item	Number of Responses	Missing Data	Not Applicable to Me	Mean	SD
School Issues					
Dissatisfaction with academic instruction	60	28	5	3.02	2.78
School was inflexible about what I felt my child needed	58	29	6	2.93	2.62
General negative attitude of teachers/staff	58	28	7	2.78	2.25
Lack of support	58	28	7	2.65	2.34
Concern about school environment (safety, drugs, negative peer pressure)	50	29	14	2.62	2.21
Child Issues					
My child wanted to be home-schooled	55	28	10	2.65	1.08
My child was becoming very upset while attending school	61	29	3	2.60	1.13
Parent Issues					
I was becoming very stressed in making my child go to school	62	27	4	2.60	1.08
I was not involved in decision-making at school regarding my child's education	56	27	10	2.50	1.07

Note. Range = 1 (very little), 2 (somewhat), 3 (quite a lot), 4 (a lot).

A particular focus of the study was on parental home-schooling choices for children with and without an identified disability or ALN. As both sets of children (disability, ALN) were considered to have specific needs, these were combined into a binary category, named specific educational needs (disability + ALN,  $n = 46$ ) and compared against the child selected because they were the eldest ( $n = 44$ ). Independent two-tailed  $t$ -tests on the nine items (Table 2) indicated no significant differences between parents home-schooling a child with a specific educational need, compared to a child without.

Further analysis using independent  $t$ -tests on the individual items in these three reactive scales found a significant difference for two items when compared to whether the child had specific educational needs. When asked to respond to 'My child was not making sufficient progress', the overall response was a mean of 2.16 (SD 1.19). When compared for parents with a child with special needs ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ), those without indicated this had significantly less impact on their decisions ( $M = 1.85$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ),  $t(42) = 3.56$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Similar differences were found between responses to a 'lack of resources'. The overall response was a mean of 2.4. For parents who had a child with special needs ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), this had significantly greater impact on their decision-making ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ),  $t(48) = 1.69$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Each of the five scales in the questionnaire were analysed for the whole cohort of parents. The scale that recorded the highest degree of impact on a parent's decision to home-school was the reactive scale that related to school issues. The least impact scale was related to the proactive overall needs of the child. The total scale scores are reported in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Total scores for the five scales.

Scale	Valid Responses	Number of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
School Issues	64	9	2.29	0.61	0.852
Parent Issues	65	5	2.27	0.76	0.420
Child issues	66	9	2.12	0.59	0.726
Philosophical Reasons	91	15	2.02	0.53	0.585
Needs of Child	92	19	1.68	0.56	0.906

Note. Range = 1 (very little), 2 (somewhat), 3 (quite a lot), 4 (a lot).

To identify any differences for the independent variables of geolocation, gender, identified child, school, school type, and gifted, a series of ANOVAs were conducted on the five scales. When considering the three reactive scales for differences between parent responses, no significant differences were found for the impact of school, child, or parent issues on decision-making across all independent variables.

For the proactive scale regarding the impact of philosophical reasons, significant differences were found for school, gender, or being gifted. For the independent variable of school, parents whose child was attending a mainstream school ( $n = 59$ ,  $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ), when the decision to home-school was made, rated philosophical reasons significantly lower ( $F(1.83) = 24.70$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ) than those whose child had always been educated at home ( $n = 26$ ,  $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ). Significant differences were also found for gender ( $F(1.87) = 6.08$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ), between males ( $N = 51$ ,  $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ) and females ( $N = 38$ ,  $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ). Philosophical considerations rated higher for parents when deciding for their daughters. For parents who had a child who was identified as being gifted ( $N = 22$ ,  $M = 1.81$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ), compared to those not considered gifted ( $M = 2.08$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ), they relied significantly less heavily on philosophical reasons for choosing to home-school ( $F(1.89) = 4.57$ ,  $p = 0.035$ ).

Significant differences were also found for the needs of the child proactive scale on the degree to which these impacted on parental decisions to home-school. For parents whose child was attending a mainstream school when the decision was made ( $F(1.84) = 14.90$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ), the needs of the child were rated significantly higher ( $n = 59$ ,  $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ) than for those who were already being home-schooled ( $n = 26$ ,  $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = 0.10$ ). This varied further according to whether the child was attending a government ( $n = 43$ ,  $M = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ), independent ( $n = 16$ ,  $M = 1.47$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ), or Catholic ( $n = 6$ ,  $M = 1.42$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) school (Tukey's post hoc procedure indicated that those whose child attended a government school were significantly more concerned ( $F(1.62) = 8.47$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ) about the needs of their child compared to those attending a Catholic or independent school.

The proactive impact of the needs of the child on choosing to home-school were also found to be significantly different for children who had been identified with a disability or ALN ( $F(2.87) = 74.29$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ). Tukey's post hoc procedure indicated that parents of children who were identified with a disability ( $n = 29$ ,  $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ) and those with an ALN ( $n = 17$ ,  $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) were significantly more likely to be informed by the needs of the child when deciding to home-school ( $F(1.87) = 14.35$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ) than those who did not have a child with a specific educational need ( $n = 44$ ,  $M = 1.42$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ).

As significant differences were found for children with specific educational needs in the total 'Needs of the Child' scale, on the degree to which these impacted on parental decisions to home-school, additional analysis was applied to each individual item in this scale to further identify any specific differences between children with specific educational needs and those without additional needs. A series of independent sample two-tailed *t*-tests were conducted on the 19 individual items that made up the 'Needs of the Child' scale. Of the 19 items, significant differences were found on 13 items in this scale, according to whether the child had specific educational needs (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Significant two-tailed *t*-tests for needs of the child according to specific educational need.

Item	Special Ed Needs		Eldest Child		Levine's Test for Equality	df	F	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>					
Needs to be constantly moving	2.20	1.23	1.148	0.86	<0.001	76.80	18.64	0.001	0.99
Feels anxious	2.68	1.21	2.03	1.20	<0.001	58	0.10	0.023	0.53
Has depression	2.00	0.96	1.30	0.95	0.018	69.28	5.86	<0.001	0.73
Has experienced trauma	1.82	1.20	1.27	0.71	<0.001	53.21	21.20	0.009	0.56
Has difficulty controlling emotion	2.33	1.14	1.67	1.06	0.354	77	0.871	0.005	0.60
Has attention issues	2.27	1.17	1.61	1.04	0.093	75	2.90	0.007	0.60
Needs one on one support	2.76	1.10	1.51	0.91	0.306	75	1.06	<0.001	1.24
Requires a different pace of learning	3.38	0.65	1.81	1.15	<0.001	58.05	23.22	<0.001	1.68
Needs additional academic support	2.70	1.14	1.37	0.86	0.014	45.07	6.42	<0.001	1.32
Requires an accessible curriculum	2.25	1.23	1.43	0.98	0.006	60.88	7.96	<0.001	0.74
Requires alternative assessments	2.56	1.09	1.67	1.12	0.871	67	0.027	<0.001	0.81
Requires a non-academic focus	2.42	1.04	1.47	0.86	0.051	82	3.92	<0.001	1.00
Requires a life-skills curriculum	2.37	1.17	1.53	0.91	0.005	66.61	8.41	<0.001	0.80

Note. When Levine's test for equality was  $p < 0.05$ , equal variance was not assumed. Cohen's *d* was <0.2 small, 0.3–0.5 medium, >0.8 large. Range = 1 (very little), 2 (somewhat), 3 (quite a lot), 4 (a lot).

From Table 4, it is evident that the degree of influence the child's specific educational needs had on parental choice to home-school varied significantly for 13 of the 19 items in this scale. The items that had the most impact were that the child required a different pace of learning (specific needs  $M = 3.38$ , eldest  $M = 1.81$ ) and that they needed both academic (specific needs  $M = 2.70$ , eldest  $M = 1.37$ ) and one-on-one support (specific needs  $M = 2.76$ , eldest  $M = 1.51$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

It has been well documented that as part of the inclusion movement, there has been increased diversity and complexity of learner needs in mainstream schools [4], with schools reporting an increasing number of challenges in supporting all learners [6]. Concurrently, Australia is following the international trend for the increase in the number of families choosing to home-school their child/ren [23,26,29]. While the number of children being schooled at home increased dramatically during COVID-19 shutdowns, and for some parents this led to a preference to keep their children with specific needs at home for a longer period [37], this research considered only parents who were registered as permanent home-schoolers in 2022.

Significant differences were found for both the impact of proactive and reactive decision-making when deciding between attending a school and home-schooling, especially for a child with specific educational needs. Proactive decision-making mainly occurred prior to enrolling a child in a school, and was based more on philosophical reasons, personal beliefs, and family educational expectations for their child. Reactive decisions, though, were those that occurred once a child was in school. These were made on the parents' perceptions of how their child was coping in school and focused on the needs of the child and their own needs not being met. While schools have no control over proactive decision-making, they should be more responsible for reactive choices. In general, parents indicated that they were not happy with mainstream schools; specifically, they wanted greater involvement in decision-making. Considering the strong emphasis in the WA 10-year workforce plan that all decisions should be made through collaborative support teams that include the parent(s), there seems to be a disconnect between the effectiveness of this and the expectations of the parents. This finding provides an opportunity for schools to reflect on these issues in relation to whole school practices to ensure that they work more effectively with parents when planning support for learners with additional needs and where concerns are raised, to provide a more suitable and equitable inclusive education for all.

Philosophical differences impacted significantly more on parents' decisions to always home-school their child. Greater consideration was also given to philosophical reasons

for home-schooling girls, more than boys, but was less relevant for children identified as gifted.

For the relatively large number of children in this cohort who had been attending a regular school prior to being home-schooled, parents indicated major reactive issues for their decision-making. These issues were related to their concerns about schooling including poor academic instruction, inflexibility of schools, negative attitude of staff, and the school environment (safety, drugs, bullying). In relation to child issues, parents indicated that the child wanted to be home-schooled and was becoming upset while attending school. Findings from a US study found that where parents perceived their child's learning needs were not being met, this led directly to them being withdrawn from school [31]. In this cohort, the parents were also becoming very stressed about making their child go to school and did not consider that they were effectively involved in decision-making, as proposed by the new policy. Similar findings were recorded from a study in the UK [30], where a perceived lack of understanding by the school about their child's specific needs led to increased parental anxiety.

In addition to the general concerns raised by all parents who had removed their children from formal schooling, for the parents of children who had specific educational needs, they were more concerned about their children not making sufficient progress and the lack of resources available to assist them. In addition, if the child was attending a government school, parents were significantly more concerned, compared to those attending an independent or Catholic school. Concerns regarding schooling have been continually noted as a reason for parents choosing to withdraw their child with a specific educational need and home-schooling them [29]. With all systems in Australia having moved from a medical model view of inclusion to a social one [33], there has been a stronger focus on addressing the specific needs of individual students within a holistic approach. This move has been supported by policy and a range of mechanisms for schools to apply for additional funding to provide adjustments required based on student needs. Qualified teachers are required to meet a set of standards prior to employment, including standard 1.5, which requires them to "Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities", and 1.6, requiring them to "Implement strategies to support full participation of students with disability" [38]. Nevertheless, the parents in this cohort were still reporting concerns regarding their child's needs not being met and that neither their child nor themselves felt welcomed or a sense of belonging. These led to reactive responses, resulting in them withdrawing the child to home-school.

According to [11], they proposed a five-pillar model to improve acceptance and belonging in schools, focusing on (1) positive attitudes; (2) an individualized approach; (3) identified teacher characteristics; (4) effective teaching and learning techniques; and (5) law. Although these five pillars focus on the individual child, it was evident from this research that acceptance and belonging were not limited to the child but were also lacking for the parent(s). As much as the parents in this cohort were concerned about their child not receiving an appropriate education that met their unique needs, they also felt a personal lack of belonging and acceptance by the school. Many were stressed by the breakdown in negotiating support for their child, indicating that the proposed support structures were not as effective as designed. Although policy and law in Australia define the need for strong collaboration between schools and parents, these policies and laws cannot ensure the appropriate attitudes of staff, thus leading to an ongoing gap in some schools between policy and practice. The importance of teacher attitudes and self-efficacy in supporting inclusive education has been given a lot of attention in recent years [39], and a stronger emphasis within schools of how teachers can work more collaboratively with parents would seem to be warranted.

Where students struggle to achieve academically, a range of strategies/processes should be available to intervene to address their needs at various levels of intensity [19]. Behavioral and social expectations should also be made clear for the whole school community and increasing levels of instruction need to be provided to assist students to meet

these expectations. Increasing the professional learning of teachers and especially of school leaders who set the culture for schools has been constantly recommended [9], yet it appears to remain a strong need, especially when both learners with specific needs and their parents are involved.

## 5. Conclusions

An inclusive approach to education has now been acknowledged in almost all jurisdictions as the most effective way to educate all learners, regardless of diversity of need. There are many good outcomes of inclusive education, although ongoing challenges are evident, especially as the diversity of need increases and the pressure on teachers also increases in relation to all aspects of teaching [40]. Together with the inclusion movement and the international adoption in many regions of a holistic approach model of education, there has also been increased parental choice [5]. While some parents have always chosen to home-school for philosophical reasons, the need of the child and their own needs have a much stronger impact on decision-making when considering withdrawal from a mainstream school, especially when the child has specific educational needs. Parents' dissatisfaction with academic instruction and the inflexibility of schools in relation to what parents felt their child needed are increasingly informing home-schooling decision-making. It is, however, not just the needs of the child that are impacting on decision-making to home-school. With a policy that expects greater collaboration between parents and schools regarding planning support for a learner diagnosed with a special learning need, this must align with greater acceptance and stronger feelings of belonging by both the child and parent(s).

Decisions around home-schooling are very complex and it is difficult to identify singular reasons for this choice. While it is often assumed that parents choose to home-school simply because of philosophical reasons, this is not necessarily the case. Of the 60 parents in this cohort whose children were in school when they chose to home-school, other reasons were more often cited. Although proactive philosophical issues continued to be part of the complexity of their decisions, they were less concerned with them and more concerned about the needs of their child and their own sense of acceptance and belonging not being met when attending school.

Care needs to be taken when interpreting the findings from this research as it pertains only to a small cohort of parents, within one state in Australia. The results, nevertheless, identify clear differences between proactive and reactive decision-making to home-school. Identification of the reasons relating to children with specific educational needs being withdrawn from school provide clear opportunities for schools to consider their inclusive practices to ensure they are meeting the needs of both the child and the parent(s) regarding providing an inclusive educational experience for all.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/educsci13060571/s1>, File S1: Parent Perceptions of Home-Schooling.

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