

EXPLORING ADOLESCENTS' PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING IN THE HOME SCHOOLING CONTEXT

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The purpose of this study was to explore the participation of adolescents in decision-making in the home school context. The sample consisted of 21 participants from 8 families in the Western Cape. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews. Five themes were identified through thematic analysis. Families disagree about the role that children are allowed to play in decision-making. Views on their participation in decision-making varied from children being the main decision-makers to children having no right to participate. Recommendations include parenting workshops to create awareness that children's evolving capacities and participation in decision-making should be respected to meet the children's growing need for independence.

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### **INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The first author is a social worker in private practice and home schooling parent. Local support groups and forums are important support structures for home schooling families. A recurring topic on the forums was the breakdown of communication between parents and adolescent home-schooled children. More than half of the first author's clients in her private practice were home-schooled children and the same pattern was observed in that parents were frustrated that their adolescent children were distancing themselves from the parents, while the adolescents felt overprotected and less independent than their peers in mainstream schools. When listening to the opinions of the parents and adolescents, it seemed as if one of the reasons contributing to the communication problems was the adolescents' perceived lack of participation in decision-making.

Adolescence is the period between childhood and adulthood where many different developmental tasks have to be completed. Physical changes due to hormonal changes are the most prominent changes which take place (Keenan & Evans, 2009:96; Ruffin, 2009:1; Stang & Story, 2005:1). According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, adolescents operate on a formal operations level, which means that their ability to think abstractly increases, and together with this so does the ability to think and plan ahead. Deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning, where specific topics can be changed to broad generalisations, also develop during this phase. The combination of deductive and inductive reasoning as well as the ability to think abstractly is one of the reasons why conflict arises between the adolescents and their parents or other authority figures (Cockcroft, 2009:338; Stang & Story, 2005:7). There is a direct link between the cognitive and emotional changes which take place in adolescents and their evolving capacities to participate in decision-making. Stage 5 of Erikson's psychosocial development involves dealing with identity versus role confusion, where identity establishment and formation are important tasks to be mastered; this includes decision-making about relationships and careers (Bester, 2007:177; Graf, Mullis & Mullis, 2008:58; Hook, 2009:297).

The SA Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) makes provision for a child to be home schooled and stipulates that home education entails a child receiving education in his or her own home. In the literature home schooling is usually defined similarly, i.e. where a learner is educated by one or both parents in the family home as an alternative to traditional education (Allan & Jackson, 2010:55; Carson, 2009:1; Moran, 2011:1063).

In South Africa the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2005) states in Section 10: "Every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child, has the right to participate in an appropriate way and views expressed by the child must be given due consideration". Viviers and Lombard

(2013:11) are of the opinion that, although legislation makes provision for the participation of children, factors such as power, status and the relationship between children and adults will influence participation. The fact that there is specific legislation which makes provision for the participation of children in matters which affect them, together with the problems identified by home schoolers, led the first author to explore the participation of adolescents in decision-making in the home schooling context. The objectives were to listen to the views of both the parents and the adolescents on the topic of participation in decision-making in the home schooling context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research approach and design**

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study to obtain rich and descriptive data (Fouché & Delpont, 2011:65; Nieuwenhuis, 2007:50; Mack *et al.*, 2005: 2) by interviewing home-schooled adolescents and parents about their interpretation of children's participation.

The case study design was used to answer "how" and "why" questions and obtain in-depth knowledge about a social phenomenon (Yin, 2009:4). Creswell (2013:98) points out that a case study is a bounded system, which means that the researcher must describe it by using specific parameters. In this study the case to be studied is the social phenomenon of home schooling, while the families interviewed are units within the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008:546; Fouché & Schurink, 2011:321; Nieuwenhuis, 2007:75).

### **Selection of participants**

As it would be impossible to include everyone from the population in the study (Maree & Pietersen, 2007:180), only those families with adolescent children living in the Western Cape and who belonged to the Durbanville home-schoolers, Cape Home Ed; Vereniging vir Tuisonderwys, HS Kitchen Table, or Cambridge International Examination at home were included in the research.

A form of non-probability sampling, namely purposive or judgment sampling, was used. In this form of sampling the researcher judges which cases would be a good representation of the population and must therefore know the exact parameters of the study (Sarantakos, 2013:177). As a home schooling mother, the first author had knowledge of the population and started with the search for participants on the various forums. After a brief explanation of the proposed research, a request was made for home schooling families, with adolescents between the ages of 13 to 18 years, to participate in the study. The following table gives a summary of the participants. The parent mainly responsible for the home schooling, in this case the mother, is indicated by "(m)". Only the ages of the adolescents were recorded as the study focused on children in the adolescent phase and the age of the parent was not relevant to the study.

**TABLE 1**  
**SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS**

Family	Code	Sex	Age	No. of years home schooled
1	(m) A	Female		
	B	Female	13	8
	C	Female	14	9
2	(m) D	Female		
	E	Male	15	6
3	(m) F	Female		
	G	Female	17	2.5
	H	Male	14	5 months
4	(m) I	Female		
	J	Male	16	2.5
	K	Female	15	1.5
5	(m) L	Female		
	M	Male	13	8
	N	Male	15	10
6	(m) O	Female		
	P	female	14	9
7	(m) Q	Female		
	R	Female	13	6 months
	S	Female	15	6 months
8	(m) T	Female		
	U	Female	16	2.5

### Data collection

A pilot study was used to test the interview guide because it is useful as an aid to the researcher by “testing” certain parts of the study to detect any problems prior to conducting the main study (Maxwell, 2009:227; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Two families and two adolescents from a third family were used for the pilot studies. It became clear that the information gathered was more detailed when the first author did not use the interview guide’s questions too strictly in a particular order, but rather allowed a natural conversation to develop while keeping the questions in mind.

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The interviews took place at the homes of participants, which meant that it took less time for them to feel comfortable in a familiar environment, as suggested by Greeff (2011:353). The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants.

The first author found that, because the interview was conducted more in the form of a conversation than a question-and-answer session, rich descriptions were gathered from the participants (Greeff, 2011:353; Nieuwenhuis, 2007:88; Seidman, 2006:7).

## Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed, after which the transcripts and field notes were studied and recurring patterns identified, divided into themes and sub-themes, and then linked to the aims and objectives of the study (Pope *et al.*, 2000:114; Sheridan *et al.*, 2010:148). The steps of processing, analysing, reporting etc. are interlinked (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:99; Rubin & Babbie, 2011:159) and part of an ongoing process rather than being progressive.

## Ethical aspects

As a social worker, the first author is bound by the Code of Ethics set out by the South African Council for Social Service Professions. Ethical clearance was secured from the university under whose auspices the research was conducted. Other ethical considerations were to do no harm to participants (Padgett, 2008:69) and making sure there was informed consent (Padgett, 2008:65) by means of explaining the consent form and emphasising the fact that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were assured of confidentiality, while anonymity was protected by allocating numbers to the participants.

## Trustworthiness

Several authors refer to four factors which ensure trustworthiness, proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985:290), namely credibility/truth value; transferability/applicability; reliability/consistency and neutrality/confirmability (Krefting, 1991:215; Lietz & Zayas, 2010:190; Nieuwenhuis, 2007:113; Padgett, 2008:181). The first author kept these factors in mind during the research process.

Padgett (2008:181) describes the “degree of fit” between the views of participants and the researcher’s descriptions of them. In this study the words of participants were used to add to the **credibility** of the study. A way in which qualitative studies could be made **transferable** is to use their findings in another setting or in future research (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195; Nieuwenhuis, 2007:115). This study could be used in future research with home schooling families in other provinces and the results compared.

Lincoln and Guba (1985:290) explain that **neutrality** is achieved when the results of the study are not based on the biases or perspectives and motivations of the researcher, but on the collected data. The literature study was the start of the process of ensuring neutrality, as the first author tried to include as many different perspectives on home schooling and participation as she could find, and not only limit the survey to perspectives with which the researcher feels comfortable (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:115).

## Research findings

The following themes emerged from the transcriptions:

- Adolescents’ participation in the decision to home school;
- Decision-making in curriculum and subject choices;
- Study times/roster;

- Social and extramural activities;
- Home school and psycho-social aspects

### ***Theme 1: Adolescents' participation in the decision to home school***

It is evident from the literature that the decision to home school is based on various reasons related to social, familial, religious and academic issues (Anthony & Burroughs, 2010:4; Carson, 2009:2; Mills 2009:24). Morton (2010:47) used three broad reason groupings, namely “natural” choice, “social” choice and “last resort”. Most of the literature on the reasons to home school focuses on the parents’ perspectives and do not include those of the home-schooled child (Carson, 2009:6; Van Schalkwyk & Bouwer, 2011:179). In this study about participation it was important to get the perspectives of the parent as well as of the child, because the first author wanted to get a clear picture of how participation is viewed in the context of home schooling.

#### **Natural choice**

Families who home school because of the natural choice are typically unhappy with a formal education system for various reasons, or view education as a natural extension of everyday life (Morton, 2010:49). Two of the families viewed home schooling as a natural choice.

*“I started in 1997 before P was born, because I was home schooling my stepdaughter at that stage. So she’s been home schooled all the way from birth”*  
(Family 6 (m) O).

*“I have been home schooling since the beginning.”* (Family 1 (m) A)

In both these families, the adolescents did not participate in the decision to home school. The mother (O) in Family 6 said that even though her daughter was now a teenager, she would not allow her to go to a mainstream school even if she chose to: *“we are the parents, we know what school is like because we have been there and we think it is our decision to decide what is best for you with our wisdom and all because of age and experience, it is our decision, so the answer would be no.”* The daughter (P) said that *“I never really wanted to go to school, but I also wanted to go to school for like a week, to see what it is like because it is a different environment.”* This authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 2013:423; Smetana, 1995:299) did not seem to have a negative influence on the parent-child relationship, because the children were of the opinion that their parents’ decision was based on a desire to protect them.

In Family 1 the mother said that she would allow the children to go to a mainstream school if they chose to. *“I gave them a choice – they could have returned to school.”* Both the children said that, although their mother had said that they could make that decision, they preferred to be home schooled.

*“Very seldom. I think there was maybe one week when I was very little, when we once went to school for fun, when we did not know what it was like, and everyone was very nice and friendly. And I did not realise that it was just because we were*

*new, so it was a little bit nice, but not really. Then I realised it was nicer to home school.” (Family 1 C)*

Where home schooling is a natural choice, it typically starts when the children are young. In the families interviewed, the children had no choice in participating in the decision to home school, because they were too young. Even though the participants were in the adolescent life stage, only some of the parents indicated that they would consider allowing their adolescent children a choice in the matter of continuing home schooling or attending mainstream school.

### **Social choice**

The decision to home school because of social choices was made when parents felt that they wanted more control over the moral and social upbringing of their children, or were worried about social issues in schools (Merry & Howell, 2009:364; Morton, 2010:50; Spiegler, 2010:65).

Most of the families who were interviewed fell into this group. In some of the families the choice to home school was initiated by the children and, after a discussion with the parents, a final decision was made by the parents as to whether they would “allow” their children to be home schooled.

*“I was in boarding school at ‘O’ and I wanted to leave the boarding school, but my dad said I could not travel to school and back every day, because it was too expensive, so it was better to stay in the hostel. I then decided that I would rather home school and I then asked my mother if she would be willing and then we went on with it.” (Family 3, G)*

The mother said that they as parents would allow their children to make the decision to return to school if they felt that home schooling was not working for them.

In Family 6 the family had home schooled their children for a short period when they were in primary school. The family moved to Spain for three years, where home schooling is illegal and the children returned to a mainstream school. When they returned to South Africa, the children continued with mainstream schooling, but the daughter decided that she wanted to return to home schooling.

*I don’t know, I didn’t like drama and complications and I just – it’s my future, and I’m putting my future in those people’s hands, and most of the time they spend reprimanding the class, and then the rest of the time we’re trying to do work, but then most of the time talking. It’s a huge waste of time, and, yes, it’s just, I do my work, and then I’m off for the rest of the day. I don’t have homework; it’s all homework. So it’s so much easier.” (P, Family 6)*

In other families where social choice was the reason for home schooling, the parents made the decision to home school the children without allowing the children to be actively involved in the decision. *“They were part of the whole thing, but they didn’t have a very big say in it. I must admit we were a little bit autocratic with regards to that, but we did consult them in every process, every step of the way. We know that they both*

*actually wanted to go to High School”* (Family 4 (m) I). In this family the children were already adolescents when the parents decided to home school them. Both the children said that they sometimes wished they could go back to a mainstream school, but knew their parents would not allow it. *“My Mom will, my Dad will say no we already made the decision; it is only a few more years then I am out of school anyway”* (Family 4, K). Her brother, J, answered “no” when asked whether he would be allowed to return to a traditional school.

In Family 5 the parents also made the decision without consulting the children or allowing them to participate, because the children were very young at the time. The decision was made mainly on the basis of religious convictions, which is one of the social reasons mentioned in the literature (Anthony & Burroughs, 2010:6; Carson, 2009:2; Howell, 2009:373). *“You know, mainly out of religious convictions. We felt like raising our children absolutely according to the Word and to prevent the influence of the world as much as possible, but gradually expose them to it as they grow spiritually. Academically it has an advantage, but to me that was secondary”* (Family 5 (m) L). When asked whether their children would be allowed to return to a traditional school, this mother said that they would consider it if they thought that the children were emotionally ready. The child, however, would not really have a say in the matter. *“No, you know, I think if he was spiritually and emotionally ready and he shows it and says for instance in Grade 10 that he would really like to return to school, we would consider it. I am not saying we will say yes or no, but I think we would really try and open our hearts and genuinely consider it for him.”* The parents in this family could be seen as authoritarian, because they have very strict rules for the children in every aspect of their lives. The children are not allowed an opportunity to take responsibility for their lives (Dornbusch *et al.*, 1987:1245; Fan & Zhang, 2014).

In Family 7 the decision to start with home schooling was initiated by the parents and then discussed with the children and all agreed to a trial period of one year.

*You know, when we moved here from Pretoria, we thought it would be the ideal time to start, because we were moving away from all our social structures. So it was partly a new beginning for us and we thought that it was the ideal time to start home schooling. But I also felt that they would perform better with individual attention, because the classes were starting to get very big in school, and I also wanted to control what they were exposed to. I still want that control. And yes, we discussed it with them, and they were very excited and they themselves wanted to home school. So we said we would give it a year, and so far it is working well.”*  
((m) Q)

The families who decided to home school because of social reasons had mixed views about the role their children played in participation in the decision. It was noticeable that in the families where the children were too young when the decision was first made to home school, the parents seemed reluctant to allow them to make the decision to return to a mainstream school, even though the children are adolescents.



## **Last resort**

The families for whom home schooling was a last resort often do not actively choose to home school their children, but are “forced” to make that decision because it is in the best interest of their children. These reasons include children with special needs or with physical or mental health issues (McDowell, 2000:197; Moran, 2011:1064; Morton, 2010:52).

Only one family fitted somewhat into this category and it was the child himself who felt the need for home schooling, because he was feeling overwhelmed by his school work and unhappy about his peers, who he felt were disrespectful.

*“Aunty, the school work became too much for me and the children in the school were not proper, or most of them and it just felt more comfortable to be on the farm. And they don’t have respect for themselves, for other people, for teachers and most importantly, not for the Lord.” (Family 3, H)*

For some families the decision to home school involves a combination of factors and is sometimes planned as only a temporary measure (Aasen, 2010:12; Morton, 2010:52). Most families who took part in the research had more than one reason for their decision and the children’s participation in the decision-making process varied from initiating the process to none at all.

## ***Theme 2: Decision-making in curriculum and subject choices***

In South Africa the Education Department determines the curriculum and subjects which are taught in public schools (Section 6A of the SA Schools Act No. 84 of 1996). Umalusi is the statutory body responsible for the standards quality assurance for school and adult assessments. Some private schools in South Africa make use of the curricula of the USA or UK, and examinations are then accredited by either SAQA or HESA, which will convert the qualification to a South African equivalent.

Home schoolers are more flexible in terms of the curriculum and subjects which they follow (Mills, 2009:59), because they can make use of either formal curricula which will lead them to write the NSC, follow the UK or US curriculum, or follow a combination of curricula which best fit the learning style of the child (SA Home School Curriculum).

The families who were interviewed all varied in the curricula they followed. Some used formal curricula, while others used a combination of curricula, with subjects chosen from providers whom they deemed most appropriate for their children.

Two of the families are using an accredited curriculum which would allow them to write the NSC. The parents chose the curriculums for the children, because the children had been in a mainstream school and had just carried on with doing the same subjects which they were doing at the time they left school.

*“Yes, we listened around for a while. [Name] is doing curriculum X and we had trouble with curriculum Y because there were problems with the papers and memorandums which were full of mistakes. Yes, there were a few problems. And what we like about curriculum X is that you are not bound by time to say that you*

*have to hand in the term's work on a specific date. You get the whole year's work, where with the other one, you only get the term's work. With the other one you had to pay once off, but you only receive a term's work. With this curriculum you can pay it off, but you get all the work from the beginning.*" (Family 7 (m) Q)

From the interviews it did not seem as though the adolescents had a problem with the chosen curricula and subjects. In some families the parents would give the adolescent a choice of subjects, but would also have subjects which they felt were not negotiable. In other families the parents made all the subject choices for their children, but would allow the children to determine which service provider to choose.

*"I had choice, my parents did encourage us to take accounting for instance; well, science is basically obvious as it is in our house and economic. I choose out of the others which seem interesting."* (Family 4 J)

*"I am just going to do three ([subjects]) because Mommy doesn't want to put too much pressure on me, so to give me a bit of a gap in the first year so that I can do music because I am very into music. [Name and Name] is more into art and I am more into music, so I am going to take up another instrument and also piano and music theory. I am now taking guitar and then next year Maths, English, Afrikaans and French."* (Family 1 B)

*"I mean I [mother] have the final say, but she will say I want to do this science programme or that biology course."* (Family 6 (m) O)

*"My mother chooses the subjects, she doesn't think we should and then she chooses it."* (Family 5 M)

The adolescents seemed to be satisfied with their parents' role in the choice of their subjects and curricula. Most of them reported that they believe that their parents have the experience to make the decisions and have their best interests at heart. According to Jamieson *et al.* (2011:23), children are individuals with rights and it is therefore important that, when decisions are taken, this should be done in consultation with the children to ensure that the decisions are in their best interests. Mniki and Rosa (2013:188) state that it is important to actively involve children in decision-making by referring to the models of Hart (ladder of participation) and Lansdown, who said that "children's meaningful participation can be categorised into consultative processes, participative initiatives and those promoting self-advocacy".

### ***Theme 3: Study times/roster***

Mainstream schools have fixed starting and closing times, and daily rosters which allocate specific times to specific subjects. When children are home schooled, the school hours can be determined by the families. Sometimes the families will choose to work according to school terms, while others work around their family's needs. The families can also decide if they do all the subjects every day, or if the children work according to themes and focus on one subject until it is completed.

Only two of the families interviewed did not have a set starting time for school. The families who had a set starting time in the morning, however, did admit to being somewhat flexible, especially in winter.

The mother of Family 3 (F) allows her children to determine their own working hours, even though this does not fit in with her idea of what those hours should be. *“When she found her own way of doing the home schooling, it worked for her. He is the same; I want to put pressure on him to start at 9 o’clock but he want to start at 10 am. He says at 9 am he is not as fresh and can’t work properly. He starts at 10 am and then he works quickly. Between 12 pm and 1 pm he watches MacGyver and then he works again in the evening from 8 pm to 11 pm. So he has his own times when he wants to work and those times don’t fit in with my times – it frustrates me – but he does his thing in his own time.”* This mother’s understanding of the difference in her children’s temperament and motivation is a good example of what Tudge *et al.* (2009:5) call force characteristics.

Participant K (Family 4) stressed the flexibility of home schooling by explaining that he had a specific way of working, but as his circumstances changed, it was possible for him to change his way of doing his schoolwork.

*“When I first started home schooling at stages I liked to work in the night, so I start at eight o’clock at night and you work all the way through to one o’clock or two o’clock and then sleep late the next morning, but it didn’t last very long until the schedule got rearranged and then I had to do it differently. Now it is just wake up normally, finish when I am done, no finish time for me to stop working.”*

Although participant R (Family 7) mentioned that one of the things she enjoys most about home schooling is the fact that they can decide what time to start in the morning, her mother added that they try to start by 08h30 at the latest. *“And you can also start as late as you want to, but then you have to finish all your work for the day or week.”* In this family the children are responsible for working out the study roster by dividing the number of pages for each subject into the days of the term. If they choose to skip a day of school, they can make provision for that as well.

*“For every term, they will look how many pages, e.g. in Afrikaans there is 180 pages. They then work out how many school days there are and then it gets divided into the pages. Then they decide how many days per week they want to work and then plan how many pages per day.”* (Family 7, (m) Q)

Family 5 distinguishes between formal and informal school, with reading, discussions around different topics and religious instruction seen as informal school. Formal school is the chosen subjects and curricula.

*“I start with my formal school only at about 9 am or 10 am, but we have more informal school before the time, like from 8 am to 10 am or 11 am.”*

In this family the time spent on the formal school work depends on the pace of the child. He needs to finish a specific amount of work each day, rather than work a set amount of hours per day.

*“I have to do a certain amount of work... there are some children who only have to work a specific number of hours, but then they sit and do nothing the whole day. The quicker I work, the quicker I am finished with school” (Family 5, M)*

Family 1 has a set routine, although there is some room for flexibility.

*“We must get up at 7 am but if it is winter, then it is very cold and then it is a bit more difficult to get up, so mom understands a bit. So then we only start at about 08h15 am or something. And from 7 am to 8 am we must get up, dress, eat breakfast and do chores. And we are supposed to be there at 8 am and usually we are.”*

Although the mother of Family 6 sets her daughter’s schedule, it is the child’s decision to work according to her own pace and then renegotiate for the following weeks.

*“She normally schedules for me, I have a weekly schedule that she schedules and then if it is too easy I will simply work ahead and then the next time she schedules I tell her but no I did extra so it was too little and if it is too much then I say no I am going to go slower.” (Family 6, P)*

In Family 4 the mother and children work together to set a working schedule. *“I give them weekly goals and then they break it down into daily goals and they have to complete their goals. If they don’t complete it in the week, then the challenge is on for them to finish it over the weekend and we’ve worked it out that they have about five to six hours, that is the plan each day, but it does take them longer. I see my goals are a bit optimistic, but they work very, very hard, although they start late” (Family 4, (m) I).* Her daughter sometimes experiences pressure, although she claims that the reason for the pressure is more due to her own process rather than her mother pressurising her. *“But they also just look at how I progress or they don’t set quite unrealistic goals, sometimes it doesn’t feel like it, but it is. I am always under pressure though. Yes. It is not my parents that really put me under pressure, but somehow I just force myself, I don’t know” (Family 4, J).* Added to this the mother in Family 4 said: *“Ja we try not to force them with them kicking and screaming, but with reasoning. I’ve always, my mom actually she was a very big influence in my life with that when my kids were still babies. She said it doesn’t help you just say to them no, she said, sit them down, look them in the eye and explain to them why and that has worked tremendously right up until now. As long as you explain why, then they can make an informed decision” (Family 4, (m) I).*

In all the families but one the adolescents participated in decision-making relating to the study times and roster to some extent, but with boundaries set by the parents. In the remaining family the adolescents set their own times, even when it did not suit the mother’s schedule. The first author did not find any literature which focused on the decisions pertaining to study times and the study roster.

#### ***Theme 4: Social and extramural activities***

When home schooling is mentioned, one of the first questions asked is about the socialisation of the children (Medlin, 2000:107; Mills, 2009:69). Socialisation can have two meanings, namely the teaching of children how to live according to the norms and

values of society, or the action of playing as well as interacting with others (Dillen, 2006:239; Maccoby, 1992:1006; Medlin, 2000:107). In the home schooling context socialisation can be either a positive or negative aspect, depending on how it is managed by the individual families (Brynard, 2007:95; Medlin, 2000:109; Moran, 2011:1065). Socialisation can either take place on an organised and formal level, e.g. through sport, youth gatherings, etc., or on an informal level, where visits and play dates are arranged by parents and/or their children.

The home schooling families who were involved in this study made an effort to ensure that their children take part in some form of organised social interaction. Some of the activities were decided on by the parents, because they saw it as an important life skill and they required their children to take part in that activity for a specific period. Other activities were chosen by the children because of their interests and/or talents.

The mother of Family 5 enrolled one of her sons at a drama academy, because he is an introvert and she wanted him to learn to be more confident, even though he did not really want to take part in it. He loves sport, however, and chooses which sport he takes part in.

*“We started with drama this year; he doesn’t like it, although I think he does sometimes enjoy it. And as I am always telling him – there are certain things that you can choose, but there are certain things that mom and dad chooses, where you don’t have a choice. So he will do drama for maybe a year or three and other sport he can choose and do what he wants, and he loves his sport.”* (Family 5, (m) L)

The parents of Family 5 also make decisions around some activities which they require the children to take part in.

*“So we have educational objectives for the year and like saying that dad feels that this is a life skill which is important and therefore you will all learn how to swim, whether you like it or not.”* (Family 1, (m) A)

The adolescent children of this family mentioned that they are sometimes not given enough space to make their own decisions, although they said they knew that the decisions their parents take are always because they want to protect the children. *“I think I would like a bit more leverage on certain things like how long I want to practice; how long I want to spend on a specific book or how much time I want to... I know this is going to sound bad”* (Participant B). In the same vein participant C, her sister, added that their parents decided *“how much time I am allowed to talk with my friends, what clothes I may wear and with whom I may communicate, because it is my parents’ interest to protect me”* (Family 1, C).

Both children from Family 1 felt that they sometimes miss having very close friends. They feel that they do not have a lot in common with mainstream school children: *“it’s not nice for me if they exclude us when they discuss some things such as school and totally ignore us, because we are only home schoolers. I would like to have some older friends [i.e. same age]. I have a lot of younger friends and they are all mad about me”* (Family 1, C).

Her sister added that she would like to have friends with whom she can have deep and meaningful relationships.

*“But I would enjoy it when we could have deeper relationships, because we are all busy and I am the newcomer in the area. Yes, the school children [children in mainstream schools] don’t have that depth at all. It’s all about boys ... about their school work and how difficult their lives are and as if they are not really living”* (Family 1, B).

The children of Family 4 are allowed to make their own decisions regarding their extramural activities. Both the adolescents and their mother are happy with the level of social interaction that comes from the formal activities, but they identified a gap in their informal interaction. The mother sees her son’s involvement in the soccer club as a positive influence on his communication skills, because he is learning to interact with people of all age groups on their respective levels. This positive interaction between the adolescent and the environment is described by Rosa and Tudge (2013:253) and Tudge *et al.* (2009:6) as demand characteristics.

*“J also plays soccer and he is very involved in the club, at the soccer club and he has got his own team that he coaches and then he plays for the Under-17s as well and then because of the time factor he ends up playing with the seniors as well. So he has got a very wide range of age groups that he interacts with, which I think is a nice good balance. He is not just focused on the age group that he is in which would typically happen at a High School. You just know how to interact with your own age group. You don’t know how to speak to adults; you don’t know how to relate to little ones. So I think it is a better option that he has been exposed to both. ... K is also very involved in her ballet, so she has the ballet three times a week and there she also has a bit of social interaction with the ballet, so it is not like she is isolated completely, but unfortunately there are no nearby friends, it is always quite an issue to arrange a social gathering of sorts. (Family 4, (m) I)*

The son who plays soccer added to this: *“Yes, sometimes, weeks get long when I don’t have any social interactions, but it is a weekly thing when I play soccer I communicate with people there and there is well, I don’t think there is really much to miss out from”* (Family 4, J). The girl in the family who did ballet said *“But I do feel a little bit too limited. Say a girl from ballet invites me to the movies, they would go and ... well they just want to be good parents, they go and research what movie we want to watch, see if it is a good enough movie, but if they haven’t met the girl or even seen her then they won’t let me go”* (Family 4 K). From the information gained from this family it seems as if there are advantages such as mingling with people of diverse age groups, although this can obviously also be true for children in mainstream schools. Furthermore, it seems as if the parents are quite involved in decision-making regarding the socialisation of participant K, who expressed that she felt somewhat restricted.

Family 3’s children are also allowed to choose their own activities. Their mother said that she has on a few occasions felt that her children have a talent for specific sport, but then the children are not interested to take part in it. She does not force them to take part

then. *“A child has his own personality and you must determine what a child’s talents or interests are and I feel you have to force a child in the direction of his interest. Not force him, support.”* (Family 3, (m) F). Participant P (Family 6) said that she is forced to take piano lessons and even though she has discussed stopping the lessons with her parents, she is not allowed to. *“There is only one thing, I would like to stop piano lessons and that I have already tried to say and they say no.”* Her mother’s reason for not allowing her daughter to stop the lessons is that: *“It is not a hectic amount of practicing, so I don’t think it is excessive to require them just to persevere at something that they don’t like, I think it builds character because sometimes in life you have to just do things you don’t really want to do.”*

The parents and adolescents agreed that it was important to take part in social activities, whether formal or informal. In some of the families the parents were too involved in the decision-making and not allowing their adolescent children to participate enough in the decisions about what activities they wanted to be involved in. In one family the adolescents even felt stifled in the informal social activities they took part in.

### ***Theme 5: Home school and psycho-social aspects***

When families are home schooling, they tend to spend more time together because the hours normally spent in school are also now spent at home and this has an impact on their emotional needs as well as the interpersonal relationships between family members.

#### **Personality and emotional needs**

Bosisio (2012:142) says that children’s “personal, relational and emotional competences” are necessary for the building of their identity. Children’s emotional wellbeing is also one of the reasons cited as playing a role in the decision to home school (Morton, 2010:52).

Both children of Family 3 said that they were less stressed about everything since they started home schooling.

*“Auntie, in a way I was stressed when I was in school and I never had the chance to become calm and I built up stress the whole time and at home it is not like that for me; I don’t have as much stress. I am calmer.”* (G)

In contrast, Participant U (Family 8) says that she feels more stressed at home because when she was in school, her parents were not as involved in her work. *“Because that’s what I loved about being at school, was that my parents, they didn’t bother me. They didn’t put pressure on me. I hate; [I mean] I don’t like stressing. I’m a stress-free person, really. I take life as it comes, and I just hate stress. So now that I’m home schooling, my mom, well, not my dad, my mom is putting stress on me, and I really don’t like that because I never – I think it was two months ago, I stressed because my mom put pressure on me, and then I decided, ‘No, I don’t want to stress.’ It’s just, whatever.”* She did say that the other big difference between school and home school is a major positive factor for her, namely that she can be herself. *“What I like about home schooling is you can be an individual.”*

## INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

In adolescence the relationship between parents and children changes (Merry & Howell, 2009:366; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991:49). In this study most participants were of the opinion that their family relationships were strengthened through home schooling and the adolescents felt that they had a more open and honest relationship with their parents than their school-going peers. The literature on home schooling confirms that when home schoolers are asked about the nature of family relationships, they tend to report that stronger relationships are one of the positive outcomes of home schooling (Merry & Howell, 2009:369; Mills, 2009:81; Spiegler, 2010:59).

Family 3's mother explained that home schooling caused her husband and herself to look at their children with different eyes.

*"I think our personal relationships have improved, our family relationships have improved. Yes I really think so. I think our children's personality has grown and my husband and I have learnt to treat these children as persons in their own right."*

The mother of Family 7 seemed to agree that home schooling changed their outlook, but expanded even further. *"I think we were so used to accept the abnormal as normal, and when the situation changed, it took a while ... and now that you look back, you realise how bad it actually was, because when they were in school, they basically lived their own lives. It was as if everyone was on his own island, do you understand? And I don't think that that is the idea of what a family should look like. So now it is as it should be. I actually regret the fact that we did not start home schooling earlier.* Her daughter was nodding her head the whole time in agreement with the mother's statement and added: *"We are now more ... close to each other, communicate more ... because we are together the whole day."*

The daughter in Family 8 described her relationship with her parents as a close one. She said that it had gotten closer since she started home schooling. *"But I have a very good relationship with my parents in general. I tell them everything. I hide nothing from them"* (Family 8, U).

The mother in Family 6 is of the opinion that the relationships between family members are dependent on setting boundaries and allowing choices within the agreed boundaries.

*"So there are boundaries, but there is freedom within those boundaries for her to make her own choices and as I said I don't agree with all her choices but she is a big girl now, she can choose. But that is the thing, there are some battles that we are not going to give in on and then ones that we can give in on; we are willing to negotiate ... and I think that keeps the relationship good, otherwise ja they feel like they got no say in their life, I can imagine you know."* (Family 6, (m) Q)

The mother of Family 1 (A) stated that there needs to be a balance between allowing children the right to participate in decision-making and not allowing them too much freedom. *"I grew up in a very autocratic home, so I try to give my children more say [in*



matters] ... *but it is a very difficult balance between giving your children enough guidance without overpowering them.*”

The adolescents of Family 1 described their closeness as a family by very specific examples. *“To do it [home school] with Mommy and to be here when Daddy comes back [from work] and you are the first one to see him and to then feel you are a family and there for each other. And to sit together and read a book and to talk about things and to be there for each other and then have quality time together and to play board games and things like that. I enjoy that very much”* (B).

Her sister (C) agreed. *“All those things [my sister said] and it also looks as though home schoolers are the only children at the moment who love their brothers and sisters. If I look at the school children that I know – they don’t have good relationships with their brothers and sisters. For home schoolers it is easy. It’s like – are you younger? Then I must protect you and I must help you; it’s the same if you are in a friendship. If you are older, I must respect you and listen to what you say.”*

It seems as though the families who were interviewed experienced closeness in their interpersonal family relationships which they thought was lacking in children who attended mainstream schools. In the families where the children had been at school and then home schooled at a later stage, the parents reported that they started seeing their children in a different light and that influenced the interpersonal relationships positively (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, Neumark-Sztainer, 2007:268; McDowell, 2000:198; Merry & Howell, 2009:372).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The families who were interviewed all made the decision to home school for different reasons, but the one factor which was present in all the cases was that the decision to home school was made because it was seen to be in the best interests of the children. Where the decision to home school was made by the children, the parents indicated that they would also allow the children to make the decision to return to mainstream schooling if they should wish to do so. Parents who decided that home schooling was the best option for the children, without giving their children an active say in the matter, also said that they were doubtful whether they would allow their children to return to a mainstream school, because the reasons for home schooling were not likely to change.

Where the children were too young to take part in the decision to home school, the parents were more open to the possibility to allow their children to return to a mainstream school.

The flexibility in the home school context makes it possible for families to choose a structure and routine which suits their individual family needs. The families can make curriculum and subject choices to suit the learning styles of the children and this enables them to progress at their own pace. In most families the decision on which material to use is made by the parents, although there are allowances made for the children to make some of the choices.

Parents get involved in their children's social and extramural activities mainly where they feel that there is a life skill that their children can only learn by taking part in a specific activity, whether the children enjoy it or not. It seems as though informal socialisation is a problem for some families, mainly because the home-schooled children feel that their interests and mind-sets differ from those of their school-going peers. Children in the home schooling context are often interacting with children in other age groups than their own, because their "classroom" is not divided according to age. This could have a positive influence on their socialisation because they are used to, and comfortable with, interaction on all levels.

Nearly all the families mentioned that their family relationships strengthened when they started home schooling. The families who were home schooling since the beginning reported that they could see a difference in the parent-child relationships between themselves and school-going peers.

Where parents did not include the children in the decision-making, the adolescents said that they were able to reflect to their parents that they were not always happy with the decisions made on their behalf, but they accepted it because they knew that their parents only acted in their best interest and for their own protection. This view of the adolescents is not completely in line with the literature or with the problems identified by clients in the first author's private practice, where it is more often the case that adolescents become rebellious or frustrated when they feel their views are not taken into consideration. The reason for the discrepancy could be that in some of the interviews the parents were present in the beginning of the interview and the adolescents may not have been completely honest.

The objective and aim of the study entailed exploring the participation of adolescents in decision-making in the home schooling context by listening to the views of the parents and adolescents. The biggest limitation experienced is that some of the parents preferred to be present at the beginning of the interview when their children were interviewed, although in most of the interviews the children were interviewed individually at some stage.

The information about the way in which adolescents and their parents view and experience the participation of the children in decision-making can be used to develop workshops around life stages and participation of children in decision-making. This could be presented to home schooling support groups or at home schooling expos to encourage parents to allow more participation in decision-making by their children as they grow older.

Research can be done about participation in decision-making by children in mainstream schools to determine whether there is a difference in the role children are allowed to play in the different educational set-ups, as it would not be scientific to generalise the result in settings other than home schooling.

The relationship, if any, between the parent-child relationship and the degree of participation in decision-making is a further aspect which could be explored through more in-depth research.

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