

Abstract

Many families who home educate turn to a neighbourhood home education group for support, resources and guidance. The purpose of this paper is to first outline briefly the context of home education in the UK and US, to analyse three different types of home education neighbourhood group as communities of practice and then to theorise how these parents learn some of what it is to be home educators through participation in such groups as members. The analysis is based on evidence from long-term home educating parents collected through thirty-four in-depth interviews and the Community of Practice framework (Wenger, 1998).

It will be argued that although communities of practice have variable features depending on the type of neighbourhood home education group a parent joins, they all engage in a form of collective situated life learning which helps transform parents to the point where they become 'home educators'.

Biography

Leslie Safran is mother of two grown children who never went to school. She recently finished her PhD thesis which centres on how the experience of home education can affect the parents. She founded in 1993 and continues to run The Otherwise Club, a community centre for families choosing to educate their children out of school, in NW London. She organises an annual home education conference at Hes Fes (see hesfes.co.uk), oversees a small independent home education magazine, *Choice in Education* and runs an annual Home Education Fair in central London in September.

Situated Adult Learning: The Home Education Neighbourhood Group

Dr Leslie Safran

Some background aspects of home education will be elaborated before going on to look at home education neighbourhood groups. For the purpose of this discussion, a two part definition of home education will be adopted. Home education firstly, is the ‘full-time education of children in and around the home often in the company of their parents or guardians’ and secondly, ‘involves the parents being committed to their [children’s] education and home-educating’ (adapted from Petrie, 1998; Petrie, Windrass and Thomas, 1999). Giving an adequate definition of home education is difficult (Lines, 1999; Bielick, Chandler and Broughman, 1999; Rothermel, 2002 and 2004; Gabb, 2004) due to children being out of school for varying lengths of time and being educated at home for a variety of reasons, such as illness or exclusion.

However, this definition highlights the elective nature of all home education and draws attention to the commitment required by parents in taking this step.

In England and Wales the 1996 Education Act states that ‘the parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable ... at school or otherwise’ (Elective Home Education Legal Guidelines, 1999). It is this last clause that legalises home education. There is no legal requirement for parents to inform their Local Authority’s that they are home educating, so the numbers of home educated children is almost impossible to gauge (Petrie, Windrass and Thomas, 1999). There are estimates of 80 – 100,000 children in England and

Wales being home educated (Meighan, 2000) to more recent estimates of 40,000 children (M. Fortune-Wood, 2005).

While home education has been legal in the US since 1993, each state has its own requirements (Basham, 2001). These vary from state to state as to the amount of monitoring and testing required by the educational authorities in order to allow families to continue to home educate (Lines, 2000; Basham, 2001).

With regard to who chooses to home educate Stevens (2003) categorised home educators in the US as 'believers' and 'inclusives'. 'Believers' are "avowedly Christian" (Stevens, 2003, p.19) home educators while the 'inclusives' are a diverse group. This group includes religious families from all different faiths as well as non-religious families, families who are interested in alternative life styles or alternative educational approaches and families who home educate for their own specific reasons.

Omitted from this dual classifications are those parents who choose to home educate because of problems their children faced in school (Knowles, 1988; Gabb, 2004). This can be due to a failure to thrive psychologically or educationally or due to social problems such as being bullied or becoming a bully.

There has been little study of home education partly because the ad hoc nature of home education in the UK and the US makes it difficult to locate its practice. Also, partly due to the prevalence of the school based mode of education which may lead to a lack of interest in exploring potentially critical alternative models. Most of the data about home education in the UK is anecdotal being based on letters to home educating

newsletters and in more recent times, e-mail lists and websites. What research there has been in the UK has focused on the effect of home education on children, the nature of their education and their social circumstances (Douty, 2000; Rothermal, 2002; Fortune-Wood, 2005 and 2006) but the emphasis here is on the parents.

In this paper, three different types of neighbourhood home education groups will be presented and then their role will be analysed according to Wenger's Communities of Practice framework (1998). This is helpful in understanding the role of home education neighbourhood group because it helps explain how these groups are formed, how newcomers learn to be part of the group, how groups continue to adapt and change in order to meet their members' needs and importantly how the neighbourhood home education groups help parents learn to be home educators.

The data for this paper was collected from 34 in-depth interviews with home educators from the UK and the US. These were conducted and formed the basis for a PhD thesis on the effects of home educating on long term home educating parents. The interviewed parents had all been home educating for more than three years as this was thought to be a time period that allowed families to settle into this choice and to have reflected on and be articulate about the experience. It is assumed, for the purposes of this paper, that home education has been somewhat successful for these families due to the time and commitment three years of home educating represents. But the success or otherwise of home education as a style of education is not at issue here. The focus of this paper is on what, if anything, parents learn through the experience of belonging to a home education neighbourhood group.

The Neighbourhood Home Education Group

The neighbourhood home education group is an important aspect of the home education experience for many families as it is often where families thinking about home educating first meet other families who have made this choice. Parents in the transition to home education have to deal with many areas of uncertainty. By implication parents are making some judgement about and challenging the school system. Parents may have to sacrifice a career option and financial stability; home education means parents will have to take responsibility for the education of their children, usually thought to be the domain of experts. Friends, relations and the parents' community may be sceptical about this choice or, even worse, against it; and there is very little direct help available to assist them in this new practice. Through the neighbourhood home education group new parents can meet and talk with those who are already home educating (Stevens, 2001) and by being helped to redefine educational objectives apart from the school system and begin to feel more confident about their choice. Therefore it is unsurprising that for many parents who are considering home education the neighbourhood home education group is not only their first port of call but can become central to their practice if they continue to home educate.

Research in the US confirms that neighbourhood home education groups are important to home educating families. Lyman, (2000) states in one survey of fifteen hundred home educated students, 85% attended a support group or intended to join

one. Also, Barfield (2002) chronicles twenty-one home educating families of which fifteen mentioned belong to a type of neighbourhood home education group. Three of these groups took the form of internet connections and five were co-ops that are described below. That such a high percentage use some kind of neighbourhood home education group does not seem surprising given the enormity of the task and the precariousness of the home education undertaking.

Barfield (2002) found that six of the twenty-one families in her study did not mention belonging to any type of neighbourhood home education group-meaning the need for or use of a neighbourhood home education group cannot be assumed. However, this does not detract from the importance of such groups to those who choose to participate in one.

A familiar scenario, when a family begins thinking about home educating, is for them to contact a national home education organisation. This organisation puts them in touch with a home educator in their local area who tells them about other home educators and neighbourhood home education groups in their vicinity. That parent may then contact other families or one of the existing groups.

If there is no neighbourhood home education group in the locality or the family does not like the existing group, there is also a real possibility of starting a new neighbourhood group. In this case, a typical procedure consists of a family choosing a place, for example a park, and advertising that on a certain day and time they will be there. Others will then come. Where they meet, what they do there and the purpose of the meeting can take any number of forms. A group may meet at free public spaces, at

each other's houses or at a space rented from churches or community centres. The group may combine educational and social activities with a trip to a swimming pool, theatre or museum. A group may remain loose and informal with the purpose of meeting to socialise. It may develop into a more defined group with a specific educational purpose. This will depend on the needs of the families involved and the organising energy of the parents. Naturally, groups will change over time as children grow.

The reasons families meet at a neighbourhood group are varied and may change over the home education lifetime of a family. In the beginning families may seek support or need advice of more experienced home educators with practical issues such as the law or educational style. They may also be looking for families with which to socialise or to undertake a project. In the next section it will be argued that neighbourhood home education groups are examples of communities of practice and the ongoing social and learning processes that take place within a community of practice will be elaborated.

The reason parents chose to home educate may affect what they require from a neighbourhood home education group. For example, those who have chosen to home educate for ideological reasons may chose a group closest to their own beliefs. These families require less induction into the group than do families who are thrust into home education as a last resort due to their child's unhappiness at school.

A further issue is locality. Due to the fact that there are not that many home educators, the mere fact that a family home educates in an area may entitle the family to be

welcomed and quickly made to feel at home in a neighbourhood home education group. This easy acceptance would not depend on any ideological alliance but the wish for more members in that location.

Communities of Practice

The community of practice theory was first developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). They moved the site of learning from formal teacher- learner relations to situated social learning. Wenger¹ (1998) elaborated on the original thesis situating learning in communities of practice which he suggests are all around us in life, are diverse and can be made up of any number of people. Each of us belongs to several communities of practice although we may not be conscious of it. Communities of practice are collectively constructed and collectively maintained. The community of practice supports a communal memory and collective knowledge that allows individuals to function within them without needing to know everything about the community or its members. The community helps newcomers to join, it generates specific perspectives and terms to enable accomplishing what needs to be done and it creates and maintains a culture "in which the monotonous and meaningless aspects of [a particular community] are woven into rituals, customs, stories, events, dramas, and rhythms of community life"(Wenger, 1998,p46). People within the community of practice "act as resources to each other, exchanging information making sense of situations, sharing

¹ In 1998 Wenger published 'Communities of Practice; Learning, Meaning and Identity'. This book is a more thorough analysis of the theories of community of practice and situated learning. Since 1998 Wenger has further extended his ideas in articles, for example 'Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems', (2000).

new tricks and new ideas as well as keeping each other company and spicing up each other's working ideas"(Wenger,1998,p.47).

Wenger (1998) analyses three main elements in communities of practice: joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire.

A community of practice requires a 'joint enterprise', a common purpose. The joint enterprise is defined by the participants and it creates ways in which the participants are mutually accountable. This process is continually being renegotiated and rewritten. 'Mutual engagement' refers to the membership of the community of practice meeting and working together within it. It also refers to the relationships created within the community of practice which are integrated and refined by the involvement of the members. Membership takes a lot of commitment and energy and if a person does not participate they fall away from the community. In this way membership is self-selecting and the continued life of the community of practice carries on as long as enough members are interested in maintaining it. Engagement in communities of practice is essentially informal and the 'rules' are constantly being rewritten. To learn the 'rules' you need only engage in the practices of the community. 'Shared repertoire' refers to the common culture of the community. This is made manifest through its stories, slang, 'in' jokes, jargon, routines, artefacts and modes of operating. After learning the repertoire members are competent to use it appropriately (Wenger, 2000).

Practice/Participation

Practice is at the core of communities of practice. Practice involves actions that are intended to achieve something, such as a goal or a project. This intention gives

meaning and helps make sense of our actions in the world. Practice is imbued with and reflects the history of the individual together with the culture and history of the society in which the individual lives. However, there can be an ever-changing subtle shift in the meaning of the practice and this requires members to be constantly re-negotiating and re-learning the meaning of the activity in relation to their own lives and the world around them.

Participation in a community of practice refers to the process of practising in a community. "It suggests both action and connection" (Wenger, 1998, p.55). It involves the social experience of membership and involvement in a community which is both individual and collective. Through participation the individual comes to feel part of the community. Crucially participation is both "an action and an act of belonging" (Wenger, 1999, p. 56) such that the community of practice becomes part of a participant's life and involved the whole person. Likewise the community is transformed by an individual's participation in it. Therefore participation is the nexus at which individual and social continuity and change are both experienced and developed.

Situated Learning

Learning within a community of practice is not external to the joint enterprise or set apart from it. It is situated in the project. The learning happens through participation in a community which involves meeting together with a goal in mind, understanding and tuning the enterprise and developing repertoire. Significant learning "is what changes our ability to engage in practice, the understanding of why we engage in it, and the resources we have at our disposal to do so ... [o]ur experience and our

membership inform each other, pull each other, and transform each other" (Wenger, 1998, p.96). The participant creates what is to be learned while they are learning it. In this way, learning cannot be said to be outside the practice or prior to it but is embedded in it.

Apprenticeship Learning: Joining a Community of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe in some depth how a newcomer joins a community of practice, first concentrating on an apprenticeship model of learning. When someone becomes interested in a community they join on the periphery and these new members must be integrated into the community through participating in it. Thereby, at the same time they both learn about and influence the joint enterprise and the shared repertoire of the community of practice. Lave and Wenger coined the term 'legitimate peripheral participation' to describe the role of newcomers to the group and their journey to becoming full participants. "Legitimate peripheral participation is intended as a conceptual bridge – as a claim about the common processes inherent in the production of changing persons and changing communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.55).

For the newcomer to become a full member in the community of practice two things must happen. First, the peripheral member needs to have legitimacy as a newcomer (Lave and Wenger, 1991) because this is the only way the old-timers are likely to see them as acceptable and help them through the learning process with all that this involves. Legitimacy can take many forms, in other contexts, from birthright to being a participant in a certain job. In this study, legitimacy is achieved by taking the children out of or never sending them to school (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Second, the

newcomer must have some affinity, although not necessarily explicit affinity, with the three main areas of practice: the joint enterprise of the group, the goal or reason for the group, mutually engage with other members in some way and have some understanding of the shared repertoire in use. If these two criteria are met then the newcomer is accepted as a legitimate peripheral participant and exposed to full participation in the form of stories, explanations, answers to questions, and peripheral activities.

In the early stages of joining a community of practice newcomers can develop an idea of what the whole is about. There is no one place from which knowledge comes. This ‘decentering’ of learning “leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organisation of the community of practice of which the master is a part” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.94). This moves the focus of learning away from teaching and towards learning and the relationship of the learner to the practice.

The participation of newcomers in the community is as much a part of the process and growth of the community of practice as the continual re-evaluation of the community by the old timers. Members, new and old, continually interact, discuss, re-evaluate, negotiate new meaning and learn from each other. Communities of practice produce their membership as much as they are produced by the members.

Guile and Young (2001) point out that the apprenticeship model of learning also involves people developing ways of thinking outside the immediate joint enterprise, giving them insight into why and how it is possible to generate new knowledge by the ‘master’ encouraging the ‘apprentice’ to extend beyond their current ability. In

communities of practice, old timers (the masters), who have developed their competence in this same way, now develop and share that competence with new members (the apprentices) of the community of practice who in turn become old timers who can pass on competence to newcomers.

Billet (1994) sees the role of the expert in a community of practice as more of a mentoring than a teaching role. The mentor allows the learner to attempt the task rather than being directive (see also Guile and Young, 2001). As the new members move toward their full participation, they have a greater sense of belonging and their identity also becomes bound up with mastery of that practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In this sense the development of identity and learning are inseparable as parents engage in the practice they begin to see themselves as home educators.

Situated Learning in Communities of Practice: Three types of Neighbourhood Home Education Group

The neighbourhood home education group is an unusual community of practice because, unlike other areas where this analysis has been applied, it is not an institution such as an office, hospital or school with general well known structures. In the neighbourhood home education group there is no defined structure, no formal obligations, no agreed way to do things and their joint enterprise may not even be made explicit. Each group will have its own variant of the joint enterprise, way of engaging, and shared repertoire. There are similarities between groups but unique differences as well.

Three different types of neighbourhood home education groups emerged from the data and were described by parents for whom the group was central to their lives. Each of these three parents, Wendy, Dinah, and Sarah (pseudonyms) had a different learning experience with a different type of neighbourhood group. I will look at each case in turn.

Wendy has four children aged 11 through 25 years old at the time of the interview. She has home educated her four children for at least some of their school career. She is part of a 'co-op'. This type of group may be more common in the US, as it was only mentioned by American home educators interviewed. She began explaining what the co-op does by saying "we get together to do unit study kind of things, projects".

Wendy describes their co-op as spending a year on a topic such as science or world history. One day a week the children meet to follow one of the parent's planned academic activities around the topic. The co-op, for Wendy, gives shape and purpose to the home educating practice, mirrors life by setting external goals that the children must fulfil such as deadlines and makes them accountable to someone other than their parents.

The co-op requires a big commitment. It must come first in families' schedules, for example they plan holidays around it but for Wendy the benefits are such that families are happy to do that. She remarked how close the families in the co-op are and described her best friends as the "4 or 5 other home schooling mums that I have co-oped with since the oldest ones were little." Further, families are able to help each other when there is a crisis. She retold with pride the way the co-op stepped in after one father fell and broke both legs and his arm. The mother then had to begin work to

support the family. However, the other home educating families in the co-op were able to continue to home educate their children, showing a strong community spirit.

Wendy has been in the co-op for some time and her children have grown up participating in it. The co-op has maintained home education continuity for both parent and children. It gives a shape to the year for the whole family, has social outings for the prime home educators in the form of social weekends away and provides activities during each week related to a study topic.

Wendy's co-op style of group is the most formal and most structured type of the neighbourhood home education group and fits mostly easily into the community of practice framework. Parents in this community of practice have the joint enterprise of teaching their children a curriculum designed by the parents together. Mutual engagement is through the organisational meetings, regular weekly meetings of the whole group and the events run by the co-op. Their shared repertoire is created through this project. Wendy exemplified the use of shared repertoire when she said the co-op parents refer to certain work as 'the Barnum and Bailey stuff'. The members of this co-op know what they mean by that phrase. This community of practice is particular to these families and seems to suit Wendy very well, fulfilling everything she expects from it. With regard to learning 'on the job' and while participation in the community of practice, she has had to re-design a primary and secondary curriculum to suit her and her children and the other parents and children in the co-op. From these experiences she learned both factual knowledge as well as how a collective works and is maintained. The members of this co-op devised together a large part of their way to be home educators.

Dinah's group has a different model of organisation involving a complicated schedule of activities from the traditionally educational such as science days to those geared to the needs of the children and young people such as 'babysitting classes'. This group, called here 'the timetabled group' meets in a designated room where they can plan new activities and store resources that they have communally bought with grant money. They also meet outside this space to engage in activities such as ice-skating and working on allotments together.

The group has an established routine to welcome newcomers. Dinah explains that when someone new comes to a meeting they are given

...a new member paper that explains about the building, what our responsibilities are, to each other as well. And so we take them through that before they actually use the building. And we also say in there if you'd like to join [the local group] on the internet or if you want to join up with [another day's] club or anything like that then these are the names of the people you want to contact.

Dinah talked about her trajectory out of the community when the home education neighbourhood group no longer suited her families' needs, saying others have taken over her roles so she feels it will survive. The fact the others can take over Dinah's roles is evidence of a community of practice with a distinct joint enterprise. The community's joint enterprise is visible to the members in it. They can see what needs doing and find a way to do it.

The timetabled group is more informal in its organisational structure and activities than the co-op. It also allows parents and children to be involved at a number of different levels unlike the co-op. But like the co-op, this neighbourhood group allows all the members of the community of practice, parents and children, to learn together and from each other. Further, Dinah is reflective about her role as an old timer and has learned about the community of practice in order to pass on her knowledge through her practice.

The third and loosest type of group was exemplified by Sarah. There were very few other home educators when Sarah began home educating. The support group began informally from the few families around but developed as time went on and there were more home educators; “We met up, had picnics once a week did different things and also tried to encourage people who had something that they had to offer, whether it was doing something with painting or whatever.”

This particular group’s ethos according to Sarah was to be relatively unstructured and allow participation relevant to each family;

It wasn’t that everybody did everything. Some people wanted to share and/or learn a particular skill. So it was kind of offering a group framework where people could come and go as they wish and could offer and take as they wished various aspects.

What was on offer, therefore, varied. The looseness of the organisation meant that a permanent location was not viable and the group chose to meet at different places depending on what the activity was. Nor was there any formal structure. The group did not write any guidelines about activities or behaviour. But as well as a co-

ordinator they had a telephone tree (this group existed before the days of easy internet access) through which to inform each other of events and this could be done at short notice. This informal structure meant the shared responsibility for the group was easy to maintain. Sarah said, "It was everybody sort of chipped in really." The joint enterprise included meeting social requirements of the families and giving support where and when it is needed. Mutual engagement took place through the meetings. Although the community did not have any written structures, the phone tree is a type of engagement leading to a shared repertoire that members of the group can learn. As they move toward the centre of the community, they understand the nuances beneath the surface of the tree as more than a mere collection of phone numbers in a random order. There could be a 'hierarchy' of the length of time members have been part of the group represented by the phone tree or knowledge that some members on the phone tree are not as efficient or involved as others.

Sarah, as a contact for her area would often be the first to talk to newcomers:

I would speak with them first, visit or come and see me or whatever and often with new people, especially if there were children who had anxieties about attending school and were a bit tense or whatever we found it was better if they came along to a big general kind of outing, say going up to B. Rock, people are just dashing around or otherwise, depending on the age, so you weren't in too confined place attending a set thing which might have been too much.

Despite Sarah's privileged knowledge as a contact, she says others in the group would also actively take on the role of making newcomers feel welcome and part of the group;

... everybody would know what the programme is ...
 [T]hey could come along to whatever they fancied and
 because it was ... not a massive group, it was always
 very obvious who the new people were. People remembered
 from their experiences of being new and how you might
 feel and try to make people feel welcome.

As Sarah points out here, similarly to other neighbourhood home education groups described, learning to be home educators in a community of practice involves both the creation of and participation in collective activities and by having to reflect on their home education practices in order to introduce newcomers to the group.

Stevens(2001) argues that each neighbourhood home education group is underpinned by the inner conviction of the parents involved. The philosophical convictions and educational styles of the parents in that group are mirrored in the organisational structure and purpose of the neighbourhood home education group. For example, parents who feel their children should lead the way in their own education would favour a group that organised itself in line with the decisions made by the children. They would not be happy in a more formally organised group where the children are expected to do certain things at a certain time whether they wanted to or not. So while it is true that parents may learn what it is to be a home educator from the neighbourhood home education group they may also choose a group with which they feel some affinity in terms of its underlying ideals. Also, each parent who joins a group will change that group by contributing their ideas and suggesting new approaches.

This seems to be the case in the three examples of neighbourhood groups cited above. All three neighbourhood groups suit these parents well. However, joining a

neighbourhood group is complicated by the fact that as new home educating families may not as yet be committed to a particular 'type' of home education. They may be open to suggestions and be influenced by the group they first approach. But this influence will only extend so far. As home education is uniquely self-determining and open to whatever type of educational style or underlying philosophy the family chooses, the parents can try a style for a while and see how it develops. They can change dramatically to a different style or use combinations of many styles. The neighbourhood home education group also needs to be able, like the parents for the children, to address and reflect the families' needs with regard to educational choices. In this way it will continue to be useful to parents who will maintain support of the joint enterprise by continuing to attend the group. All three parents, Wendy, Dinah and Sarah, had helped to create the group they were members of and this will help to ensure that the group is one they would like to be members of. However, over time, both their inner convictions or their family needs or both may change and either the joint enterprise of the group will need to change to accommodate this or families may leave the group.

All three of these different types of neighbourhood home education groups are places where parents learn some of what it is to be a home educator. They learn through their participation in the group and from the old timers of the group. Parents learn formal curriculum content well enough to teach it, they learn to work as part of a collective, they learn to reflect on what education means for their family and put this into practice, and they learn to reflect on what their community of practice is like in order to integrate newcomers. Further, parents' articulation about their practices shows the

internalisation of their experiences and the process of becoming identified as home educators.

Concluding Discussion

The advantage of the community of practice model is that it helps us to understand how newcomers can become members of a movement that is diverse, grass roots and non hierarchical. It describes and explains the mechanism whereby these groups remain active and useful and explain why they do so. This framework helps explain how parents can learn to be home educators through a situated context, the neighbourhood home education group.

Each support group reflects and is created by the specific needs of those involved. While the groups may share a general enterprise of educating their children out of school, engaging mutually and sharing a repertoire, the form the neighbourhood home education group takes varies widely. The diversity is testimony to the democratic, participatory and situated nature of these communities of practice involving its members learning and constructing their practices for themselves.

Situated learning, learning through one's life experiences, has long been recognised. With regard to home educational practices it can begin with an individual's realisation that learning is a lifelong activity (Stehlik, 2003) which takes place through the practices of daily life. Exercising self-determination through learning in a socially situated practice can be a life enhancing and transforming enterprise. This process needs to be actively re-discovered and promoted so that all people, not just home

educators, can take advantage of the potential benefits of continued, explicit life learning.

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