

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: INTERVIEWS WITH A HUNDRED BRITISH HOME EDUCATING FAMILIES

Paula ROTHERMEL

Abstract

This study provides the first in-depth insight into home educators' thoughts in the UK. One hundred UK-based home-educating families were interviewed, 33 twice, mostly in their own homes, after having been randomly selected from a larger sample of families responding to an initial home-education questionnaire (Rothermel 2002). Participating families were from diverse socio-economic groups, family structures and cultural backgrounds. The interviews were undertaken with a view to exploring issues within home-educating families that would not necessarily have become apparent through the questionnaires alone. The interviews revealed clear friction in some families, both within the home-educating family and between them and their extended family, which directly related to home-education. Generally however, the home-educating families were satisfied with their choice and relished the close family relationships engendered. These extensive interviews underline the view that viewing home educators as 'types' is useful only to those local authorities aiming to integrate children into school.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst it has become fashionable to refer to home education as an 'under-researched phenomenon' (Morton 2010) this position is no longer tenable. The list of

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British research on the topic is long indeed and includes: Badman (2009), Barson (2004, 2009), Bates (1996), Berlow and Cox (2010), Bhopal, Kalwant and Myers, Martin (2009), Blacker (1981), Brunton (1996), Clegg (2001), Eddis (2007), Fortune-Wood (2005, 2006), Goymer (2001), Hopwood, O'Neill, Carstro and Hodgson (2007), Ivvats (2006), Kendal and Atkinson (2006), Lowden (1993), Meighan (1995), Monk (2005), Morton (2010) McIntyre-Bhatty (2007), Parsons and Lewis (2009), Patterson (1995) Page (1997), Petrie (1992), Petrie, Windrass and Thomas (1998), Rothermel (2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2010), Saffran (2008), Thomas (1998), Webb (1990, 1999) and Yusoff (2009).

Amongst the body of research there have been a number of studies involving interviews, but none have been as large or extensive as Rothermel (2002) whose research involved 100 face-to-face interviews with home educating families in their own homes. Despite the importance of these interviews, they were not included in a final written study but were instead reserved for inclusion in a later book (Rothermel 2011). This paper seeks to redress the situation somewhat, and provides the first in-depth insight into home educators' thoughts in the UK. Rothermel (2005) built upon earlier work attempting to categorise home educators as 'types' and the discussions set out on this present text allow the reader to further explore this idea. Earlier UK works with 'types' include Blacker's (1981) UK 'Rebels', 'Competitors' and 'Compensators'. Analysis in Rothermel (2005) confirmed that these groups indeed existed but found the picture considerably more complex owing to the fluid nature of home education and the growth in numbers over the last 30 years. Further, there is work from the United States by Maybery (1988), whose classifications are particularly insightful in drawing comparisons between 'alternative' families and some religious families. Van Galen and Pitman (1991) divided families into 'Ideologues', (traditionalists, often Christians, who become increasingly radical) and professional child-centred 'Pedagogues', whilst Stevens (2001) studied 'earth based' and 'heaven based' families. Most recently in the UK, Morton (2010) presents a three category approach, listing three loose groups, defining 'natural', 'social' and 'last resort' home educators. These can be broadly compared, in order, to Blacker's groups. Morton's study involved interviews with 19 families and wider discussions with other home educators that echo those set out in a report by the Office for Standards in

Education (Ofsted 2010) which lists the bands as philosophical/religious, education and well-being concerns, and bad school experiences. [Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills which is the non-ministerial government department of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools In England.] The Ofsted report involved data collection from 15 Local Authorities, and meetings attended by 120 parents and 130 children, whilst questionnaires were completed by 148 parents and 158 children and young people. Ofsted and Morton categorisations of home educations differ in that whilst Morton places religious families mainly in her 'social group', Ofsted appears to place similar families together with the philosophical; both highlight however, that these categorisations are not exclusive.

Rothermel (2005) took a different approach, calling for an end to categorization, concluding, "Perhaps there is now, in the UK, too diverse a population pursuing home-education to be neatly categorised". Rothermel suggests defining home-educators by strata; first, as a superficially homogenous group, second, as diverse groups, third, as families, and fourth, as individuals. This stratum approach provides insight into the increasing numbers of families who are choosing to home-educate and their growing appearance as a movement. Further, it allows for the way families adapt, both over time and concurrently, as they learn, produce more children and tailor their different approaches to different children within the family.

METHOD

From a study involving over 1000 questionnaire responses, 419 were analysed and from these 100 families were selected for interview. This was a broadly random approach. Some families were interviewed because they were involved in a concurrent assessment programme, by virtue of having children in relevant age groups (this aspect is described in detail within Rothermel 2002 and 2004), whilst others were chosen because they were en-route as the researcher spent approximately six weeks (in two halves) touring the UK in pursuit of the academic performance data.

FAMILY STRUCTURE

The majority of the 100 sampled families were heterosexual two-parent families (81). The remainder consisted of 17 homosexual/heterosexual one-parent families, and two homosexual two-parent families. Due to the fluidity of the family however, these

figures are inconstant. Over the period of the interviews (approximately eighteen months), one married couple separated, one single parent began to live with her ex-husband, another two home-educating single parents (a male and female) who had previously been semi-cohabiting, went their separate ways, a single parent began a lesbian relationship, and at least 10 children were born. Some families were transient: one family began travelling around the world, another emigrated and eleven others simply moved house.

Parental Background

Several parents had received a religious upbringing and continued in that tradition; some had been born overseas; some came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, others quite the reverse. The idea of the middle class family as stereotypical home-educators was dispelled by observation of this sample. Three of the families had been, or were, travellers; several of the families might have been able to afford private schooling had they desired ($n \geq 5$) and several others clearly struggled, making 'financial sacrifices' in order to exercise their choice to home-educate. While the majority of families in this study owned their own houses, a number of others lived in rented accommodation ($n \geq 11$). One family was squatting.

A minority of parents had been subjected to bullying at school or had been irregular attendees. Approximately half the parents said that they had enjoyed their time at school. Most parents believed that most of their education had commenced after leaving school.

Occupations for which parents were trained ranged from miner to teacher, tree surgeon to shop assistant and vicar to biologist. While some families had one parent at home with them most of the time, often that parent continued working. It was not unusual to find highly qualified parents taking on manual work, perhaps involving night shifts, to fit around home education. A couple of parents worked seasonally with the children, taking their wares to various festivals to sell. There were just 16 parents who appeared not to work although the actual situation was unclear. Five parents were disabled and unable to work. All parents were resourceful, but where finances were limited it was often necessary for both parents to contribute in some way to the family

income. It was evident that with children at home, parents made use of creative work arrangements, such as, arranging factory shifts to fit in with a wife's part time work or organising appointments around the need to provide transport for the family. The number of parents on social security benefit was very small. Of the 183 parents in the study, 13 (7.1%) were professional musicians. Science specialisations were also noticeable amongst the parents.

One-parent families

There was only one, single father parent family amongst those interviewed. Generally, single parents coped well although life could be extremely tough, as one parent, Mary, stated:

“Rollo was a breech birth. I still breast-fed him but he was damaged at birth. He had no speech, suffered from epilepsy and had poor co-ordination. At four he just lay on the floor and dribbled, he wasn't toilet trained, didn't sleep, suffered petit mal, a tremor and an eye flicker.”

Mary's journey with Rollo had been one of despair and loneliness partnered with joy and triumph over the difficulties they had overcome. Home-education, however, had not been a last resort for Mary:

“I probably would have considered home-education anyway, especially up to secondary age. It's easier to be at home with a little one, you can cater for every need.”

There were single parents who received support from their own parents or ex-partners. For example, Ms White ran a shop with her mother who also assisted with the care of Rita, aged 5 who was taken to the shop whenever it was necessary. The three Dance children shared two different fathers, both travellers who regularly (at different times) appeared and stayed in their vans in the garden, helping out as necessary with the children. Rose Woods' father was supportive even though her parents were separated – during the interview period her mother began a new relationship and became pregnant: Rose's mother worked part-time and her grandmother remained supportive both financially and morally.

Homosexual two-parent families

The children from same-sex parent families appeared not to suffer adversely, even where their situation was extreme. One such family lived in poverty yet the children, though unkempt, appeared secure and apparently held their mother's partner in high esteem. The second family, the Soames', were far more of a unit than many of the families visited. Paula and Sarah had been born into this same-sex family as planned for additions to the relationship and this may have led to the children's security as well as to widespread acceptance of the family. The Soames' children assisted with the research in several ways, the results indicating that the children were academically advanced and psycho-emotionally stable.

Heterosexual two-parent families

While mothers were often the parent most involved with the day to day running of the children's education, the fathers tended to adopt a different approach, namely, that whilst mothers were often the 'doers', the fathers tended to be the 'opinion givers'. This could be quite burdensome for the mothers.

The Kahns were an Anglo-Asian family and Mr Kahn was sceptical about whether home-education was the 'right' thing. Here, he admits to having a different opinion to his wife, Jane, yet interviewed in his wife's presence, he is cautious not to upset her:

“If Raul [aged nine] said he wanted to go to school, I would be glad. I've no philosophy to be undermined. If Jane said to send him to school I would have said yes. If Jane hadn't suggested home-education then I would not have thought about it. My first thought when Jane suggested it, was that I was concerned it was the right thing, that's about it. No, I don't play much part in their education. I'm quite happy with the role I play.”

The Smith family were, perhaps, the stereotypically 'normal.' They were neither religious, nor did they harbour either libertarian or conservative views. Their

town house seemed conventional from the outside. The family were not affluent and the furniture reflected this. Mrs Smith said:

“Originally we had no intentions of this. She didn’t take to nursery and when it came up to starting-school age I asked the head if she could stay in the nursery. She said ‘no’, because of ‘pressure of places’. We thought, ‘to hell with it, she can go when she’s ready. I still envisage her going, but it’s getting further and further.”

Home-educators and large families

Families often tended to be larger than the norm, particularly where the parents were practising Christians. However, occasionally the decision to home-educate was influential in the decision to bear more children: initially this may have been to create company, although the family closeness that came from home-educating often caused families to welcome more children. Accompanying the shift towards attached parenting, as seen in many of the families who home-educated from birth, was a desire to leave birth control to nature. The Christians tended not to use contraceptives. When asked how many children they were planning to have, Jeanette, pregnant with her tenth child, looked to Heaven and replied:

“Only the Lord knows.”

And Jane Croll (with four children), a non-Christian responded to the same question:

“As many as arrive.”

Older and wiser parents

It appeared that about 30% of the mothers interviewed may have not started their families before the age of 30. Nine sets of parents with young children appeared to have adult children living away from home, possibly from earlier relationships. In each of these cases, the earlier children had attended school. It was possible that ‘late’ parents were more philosophical about education than younger, less experienced ones. It was not unusual to hear the older parents express the following sentiments:

“I planned to go back to work and realised we just couldn’t hand our 5 year old over to someone else.”

Four sets of parents specifically referred to having been in their forties before their first child was born:

“I was over forty when we had Deborah, and I breast-fed her for three years. We would have liked more children.”

The attitudes and roles of fathers

There was just one family where the father was unambiguous about his disapproval of home-education. Mrs Wright stressed:

“I belong to ‘Education Otherwise’, my husband, most emphatically, does not.”

Throughout the ten months between interviews Mr Wright continued to believe that his children *ought* to be in a school despite their apparent contentment. This, his wife explained, was more a result of his upbringing than of his attitude towards his own children’s education.

There were fathers who seemed to need reassurance that home-education was good for their children:

“My husband was very unsure about home-education to begin with, but once he saw the LEA report and could draw comparisons he felt better. He still has niggling doubts.”

And:

“It took a while to turn Geoffrey on to the idea of home-education. He felt that I was attacking everything we had trained for [teaching]. Once he started back at school after the holidays, he came home after one week and said, ‘OK, you can home-educate. I don’t want them ever to be as miserable as I am now.’”

Several fathers really felt they would like to put far more into their child’s education that they were able, being restricted by work obligations:

“My work means that I cannot spend as much time as I would like.”

Below are the voices of two fathers who enthusiastically supported home-education for their children:

“Attachment parenting¹ is central to my philosophy. It is the opposite of conventional parenting which is adult driven and has bedtimes imposed. With attachment there is freedom for the child who is empowered within boundaries, there is no defined bedtime, less regimentation, the children making decisions for themselves, thinking, spontaneity, choice. It is more important just to function.”

The final paternal comment was quoted as a reminder that there was more than one way of seeing a situation:

“A friend of mine at work was home-educated because he lived in Africa. He says it was a positive experience. But then he says this about boarding school too!”

DECISIVE FACTORS IN THE DECISION TO HOME-EDUCATE

Decisions to home-educate any one child were quite often made before the children were born. However, initial judgment may have come about following poor

¹ ‘Attachment parenting’ refers to a style of parenting that is generally defined as involving some or all of the following: prolonged breastfeeding, the family bed, non coercion, and Liedloff’s (1986) continuum theory.

experience with an older child, the home-education of a child already born or because an earlier child had been withdrawn from school and was now being home educated. Thus, subsequent children might have been receiving their education on the basis of what had been considered best for an earlier child. The pattern of an eldest child with some experience of school and younger siblings with little or none was fairly common. Where decisions were made after birth they were often linked to the child's emerging character combined with a growing sense of attachment on the part of the parents. Decisions to home-educate schooled children were usually precipitated by an event, but often, at least with the primary-aged children, parents were already inclined towards home-education having considered it at the pre-school stage. Where the children were older, parents might not have considered home-education prior to the situation that caused them to withdraw their child. Within the sample there were just two single child families who had withdrawn their teenage child and it was unclear whether those parents had considered home-education during the very early years, although both families recalled that they had not been happy to send their child to school initially.

Home-education arising as a natural progression from at least one child's birth was apparent for 57 of the families in the sample. The majority of these families had experienced parenthood, enjoyed it and felt loath to be parted 'unnecessarily' from their offspring at such an early age as school attendance requires. However, the issue was complex. One of the other families had sent their child for one day, another for a week before withdrawing. Some other families had used pre-schools.

At least 10 of these families had older children, possibly from previous relationships, who had been schooled. Because of the changing constitution within a number of families it emerged that they often did not mention that they had older, absent children, unless probed. Home education here seemed an attempt not to repeat the earlier experience.

Some parents were concerned about the exposure their children would have, if at school, to aspects of society, trends and relationships. Following from these types of concerns often came a feeling of positively not wanting strangers directing their

children in an environment so far removed from the comfort and security of home. This led them to question whether separation was actually healthy at such tender ages and why school was necessary at all.

There were 9 families with 13 children who had special needs, but whether such parents home-educated because of these special needs was difficult to say. At least 3 families said they would have home-educated with or without special needs in the family.

Bullying at school had led some families to withdraw a child from school but nearly always the home-education 'seed' had been sown earlier by reading an article, speaking to someone involved in home-education or who had read about it, or having a lifestyle already attuned to 'alternative' ideas. Molly had left school following several incidents of bullying both by children and the teachers at the school. Her mother attributed this to her being a 'foreigner' in the area, although it was likely that the family's traveller lifestyle contributed to Molly's experience.

There was not, within this sample, any evidence of overnight decisions to home-educate. The decisive factors were emergent, the result of a string of seemingly insignificant events that made the choice to home-educate appear natural for the family when the time came to take decisive action. The same was apparent for religious families who came to home-educate through an evaluation of their beliefs and by embodying the philosophy they held on life. For the families whose grown-up children had been through the school system and for those whose children had originally been in school, it was past experience that led them to seek an alternative for their later children's education.

SPECIAL NEEDS AS A PROMPT TO HOME-EDUCATE

Amongst those children in the sample with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (n=13), it was difficult to separate their condition from their parent's decision to home-educate. Generally parents reported that they would have considered home-education for their children with or without Special Needs but there was nevertheless, the inference that their child's condition may have prompted home-education.

Additionally there were home-educating parents who were either physically disabled

or had a mental disorder ($n \geq 6$). For some, this made home-education the simpler option, for others it put them under considerable extra pressure. Parents of children with special needs often home-educated their other children, younger and or, older. One of the difficulties with defining SENs for this research was that some of the relevant children had not been 'statemented', a process parents often connected with school provision rather than home-education. Some families even with severely handicapped children, did not want their children's education being, as they saw it, taken out of their hands by virtue of the statementing process.

Parents with disabilities

Deborah's mother, Elizabeth suffered from ME (Myalgic Encephalopathy) and she explained the financial constraints they were under:

"We don't have a computer. With moving and Andrew's work it's not had a slot, but things are picking up. We tend to follow themed days but with ME it is difficult."

Disability could lead to exclusion although the barriers faced were not clearly connected with home education. One family where both parents were disabled parents explained that they did not want to mix with non-Christians. They held extreme fundamentalist ideas and were both semi-housebound. They had tried meeting with other home-educators but described being put off by the 'New Age fraternity' with their 'heretic ideas'.

MOVEMENT IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

Norma Jones' story was rather characteristic of home-educators who withdrew children from school, embraced home-education wholeheartedly and then, due to a change in circumstance, returned the children to school. The Jones' underwent tumultuous change during the time of this research. Norma Jones moved from radical activist home-educator to a 'school mum'. Her then 7 year old daughter had, originally been in school but was removed by her mother:

“My sister told me about home-education. I thought it was a disgusting idea. I was worried about the social aspect. Since Lilya was born I followed rules, did what my health visitor told me to, she told me this is the way you do it and I did it. We spent a year searching for a decent nursery school so she could socialise and meet other children. Lilya and I went to all the usual mother-baby things. At ‘Tumble-tots’ they said Lilya was unusually agile: at school the teacher said her motor skills were bad and that she wouldn’t go on things. On the way home I questioned Lilya. She said, ‘Well, that’s for babies’. Then the teacher held her hand too tight and put her off writing. I was made to feel like a pushy parent. It was easy having her at home again, I’d never had a time without a child at home, I had Jamie by then.”

At the time of the interview Norma was studying and her husband had become a part-time ‘househusband’. However, the following year brought changes to the family. A split in the marriage left Norma alone with the children and with a college course to complete. She made a decision and placed the children in school.

Some parents, like Norma Jones, turned to higher or further education in an attempt to keep up with their children. Where circumstances altered, it was sometimes the children who became ‘victims’ of their own success by having been the catalyst towards their parent having increasingly less time to devote to their home-education. In Norma’s case her marriage break up may have been connected with her growing aspirations. There was, however, a sense of parents grasping the opportunity to provide motivated role models for their children. Where the children’s home-education was abandoned such parents sometimes believed the gains in terms of income and status were equitable.

Kim, another mother who returned a child to school following earlier withdrawal, did so because she could not spend enough time with her daughter, who in turn, was dissatisfied with receiving so little attention:

“Mum just didn’t have the time for me.”

There were two other families whose children returned to school having once been withdrawn. The Taylors returned one child to school and sent the younger son for the first time: they explained that they simply felt this to be the best decision at the time since the elder son wanted to re-try school. The Taylors were Quakers and lived in a very rural area with a strong local community and Quaker tradition. The children had plenty of local school friends and the decision to try school was not such an upheaval as it might have been under different circumstances.

The Turners lived in London. They had four children, two of whom had been in and out and in again to school and two who had never previously tried school. Mr Turner said:

“After 17 years of continuous childcare/home-education, we are now experiencing being off duty for the first time during school hours. The pressure of no rest time has been considerable and has had knock on effects on the children. What a joy it is to pick them up from school, not being exhausted and depleted from being over stretched all the time. We hope this new arrangement² will provide the necessary educational input and emotional happiness.”

HOME V SCHOOL: INTER-FAMILY CONFLICT

Inevitably there was conflict and who was doing what, for whose benefit, was a further recurrent theme. There were occasional signs of friction within some families as comments from the Thistle family, below, show. The house was located in a modern village estate in the south of England. Geoffrey, the father, wore a full bushy beard and tattoos that reflected his past occupation as a sailor. Mrs Thistle was prim and Laura, their daughter aged eleven, was a gentle and soft-spoken child. This was a strictly hierarchical and unusually conservative Jehovah's Witness family: Mr Thistle, who had come late to the religion, was the family's leader:

² The parents would continue to provide maths and English tuition at home.

“Laura does not mix with children. She was initially in school when her brother was there to look after her, but she was being bullied. She had large bruises. If we had our choice over again we would have home-educated all the children. John [now seventeen-years-old] settled well but then the bus driver took his bus pass and left him stranded. He couldn’t get a new one. Kept being kept on detentions because of his homework – there were times when he could not get into school. Then we didn’t want him to study flags: we don’t believe in nationalism.”

John lived away from home and, like his older siblings, had not chosen to follow his parents’ religion. Describing himself as a ‘rebel’, he worked as a car mechanic and wore earrings. He sat on the edge of a chair, determined to have his say:

“I missed school at the time but now I’m happy, sort of. I missed metalwork and sports. I used to come first in Sports.”

His father and sister continued:

[Father] “Aye, but we don’t believe in competition.”

[Laura] “I love swimming but never go.”

[Father] “We are just getting over the competition. They used to go twice a week. [...] I was bullied at school but I never knew why. Laura was bullied but didn’t say until after we took her out.”

Laura suddenly spoke up for herself:

“I wouldn’t mind going to secondary school. Mum could have her time back and do her housework and I’d have more time.”

And John added:

“I didn’t want to leave.”

Whilst both parents listened to the children, neither appeared willing to acknowledge what the children were saying:

[Mother] “At home we can concentrate on maths – how to use it in the shops; she’ll need maths. In cooking she will weigh all her own things up. We’ve done estimation, in the garden, in the rain.”

[Father] “These things you can’t do at school.”

John was asked if he would consider home-education for his own children:

“It depends. Home-education works because you don’t get bullied. I don’t like to think back. What’s done is done. I look forward.”

There were echoes of inter-parental conflict in the discussion below, although Mr Kahn followed the line of least resistance. Asked about future expectations in terms of examinations, Mr Kahn began:

[Father] “I firmly believe that they should get ‘O’ levels and GCSE’s and go onto higher education and I can’t practically see how they are going to get GCSEs in some specialist fields. Although I could read a book about physics, I don’t feel I have enough time to devote to doing that and I don’t feel I have that expertise, so unless someone can come up with a practical solution I see part-time school. Jane’s friends with children of that age seem to have gone to school. I am open to guidance. If Jane can teach them the coursework for GCSE that’s fine. I’m saying I don’t want to go out and teach my children how to do French, Maths and Russian because I haven’t got that interest.”

[Mother] “No, I’m not undermined by my husband’s attitude. I consider his opinion and I work hard to check and research the things he’s doubtful

about. It sometimes shakes my confidence. I have to reaffirm my confidence.”

[Father] “Do you believe people can get to university without GCEs?”

[Mother] “I do, but that doesn’t mean I won’t tell the children that it’s best to have them.”

[Father] “University is a priority for me, but not so much for Jane. They might not suffer as a result of not going, but it is beneficial.”

[Mother] “The difference is that you have been to university and I have not. I’m sure it is very nice and to get on in the world today, it is the key and the easiest way, rather than not have the keys. If you are the locksmith it is better, you have more keys. That’s why I don’t have such a priority on university as he does.”

DISCIPLINE WITHIN THE FAMILY

This issue was one that emerged slowly through the interviews. Attitudes to discipline were particularly relevant for the home-educated children, who may have had less opportunity to react against any adverse discipline than had they been in school. For some parents, their attitudes towards discipline were intrinsic to their wider beliefs concerning parental duty. Interviews with families in their own homes provided a powerful base from which to explore discipline issues although discussion with the children about their own attitudes was only undertaken with the families who did not use corporal punishment.

The Conrad household discipline programme was interesting. Mr Conrad pointed out a board on the wall resembling a ‘Mastermind’ game board:

[Father] “We have a points board. For good work the children receive points. If they misbehave they lose points.”

[Mother] “I’m not above slapping their backside, but only after several warnings. I don’t think they are particularly deterred by that though.”

Whilst Mrs Johnson (a Jehovah’s Witness) used a more straightforward approach:

“We tell them off, or smack.”

Molly’s father took the question on a more light-hearted basis:

“Discipline? She gets threatened with not having things. She’s not bad. Doesn’t do stupid things. If you tell her what a twit she’s been, she understands.”

It was not possible to assess how common corporal punishment using an instrument was, although Jeanette, mother of a large family, described what is often termed amongst some Christians as ‘loving discipline’:

“We use the wooden spoon. They don’t do it twice. We inflict pain short term but in the long term they learn not to give pain to others.”

Jeanette qualified this by adding:

“Usually, if someone asks for something politely you give it to them, but this can go on and on for ever. We use an egg timer, this puts on a time limit before another request can be made for the same item.”

The philosophy of corporal punishment amongst some Christians stems from adherence to biblical ideas such as:

“Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.” (Prov 23:13,14)

SHIFTING VALUES

Whatever route to home-education, the initial decision was often reinforced over time, perhaps several years, through the parent's experiences and connection with the home-education movement. It appeared that the practice of home-educating sometimes led families to shift the parameters of their expectations and beliefs. This shift appeared to support the theory promoted by Bion (1961), whereby seemingly moderate individuals tend towards radicalism once they have membership of a group. The term 'group' is employed here as an umbrella term to include all home-educators.

Joining an organisation and communicating with other home-educators, reading literature on alternative education, spending time with the children; all these factors compounded upon the original, perhaps tentative, decision to home-educate, so that, as was evident in many families, they moved from conventional to unconventional, increasingly questioning establishment norms. Interestingly, a family might have appeared 'average' to the 'outsider'; they owned or rented a terraced or housing estate house, and dad worked nine-to-five. The family may, however, have moved far beyond their original stance so as to be quite unrecognisable in terms of what would normally be 'expected' of such a family by society at large. Four families interviewed were either considering or already involved with, exchanging their town houses for a life within communities based around home-education. These were not offbeat communes for 'alternative'³ people, but apparently well organised ventures involving investment and commitment, whereby each family had its own private accommodation but shared common land and could enjoy, on a continual basis, the company of other home-educating families.

[Father] "I am interested in the community, car sharing, whole food, mixed race living."

Home-education for many, altered from being an idea about whether or not to send children to school, into a philosophy of life. The change in direction that the families went through appeared to intensify with more exposure to 'home-education'. It left 'ordinary' families living extraordinary lives.

³ 'Alternative' is a name given to people who feel, others feel, are different. New Age Travellers, Vegans etc. might be considered as 'alternative'.

Alternative ideas about medicine

Most families underwent a transformation proportional to the length of time involved with home-education, becoming increasingly radical in relation to their starting point. Families who had never questioned society's norms began questioning everything, not just education but medicine, politics and life itself. On the subject of medical advice, Rob's father commented:

“We are very seldom at the doctors. Rob has not been for five years. He only went for a vaccination but now we use homeopathic vaccinations.”

This father's shift of position on vaccinations was typical of the experience described by or observed in, a number of the home-educators although this was difficult to quantify with accuracy.

Breastfeeding – nurturing, attachment & as a sign of change

Long-term (between 8 months and 6 years) breastfeeding was prevalent although the actual incidence was difficult to quantify since the time spent nursing children often increased in relation to the families growing commitment to home-education. Many mothers found that in the absence of work, nursery or school pressures, there was simply no reason to cease nursing until later than the norm. There were, of course, families committed to this style of parenting from very early on but it was nevertheless characteristic of the way families' values shifted. Families who may not have considered attachment parenting and who may actually have withdrawn their first child from school, often shifted gradually towards a position where their subsequent infants received a very different style of parenting. So apparent is the social stigma attached to nursing young children, that families were reticent about mentioning that they continued to nurse their young child. Indeed, it is not a question that one would normally ask about a three or four-year-old child. However, once the practice became known to the researcher, questions relating to nursing were included in the interview routine and a clear pattern emerged. Mrs Gardner, a rather formal lady, was not someone one would associate with long-term nursing, yet here she describes her metamorphosis:

“I breast-fed Julianne until he was four-years-old. I’d breast-fed Julia for ten months, Jannine for a year and Jemima for three years. With Julia I didn’t have the confidence, but once I’d fed one or two, I felt it was beneficial. I just became more open minded.”

Christian home-educating mothers interviewed also tended towards long-term nursing although in their case this was less indicative of a shift than of a fundamental philosophy. Many of the Christians believed that breastfeeding should be for exactly 12 months and were unusual in not introducing solids into their babies during that year. One mother commented:

“My children are each exclusively breastfed for 12 months. After that date they are put onto solids. I have heard that it is harmful to continue nursing beyond 12 months.”

Jehovah’s Witnesses however, tended to take a far more liberal approach to long-term nursing and in this respect had more in common ideologically with the parents who were growing increasingly ‘alternative’.

Shifting Prejudices

Another parent described the way her attitudes to people had changed:

“I used to look down my nose at people who weren’t like us. Filthy travellers, gypsies, new-age hippies, those who scrounge off the state. I’d have called academics ‘stuck up toffs’ and hated anyone who I thought was ‘above’ me. I used all manner of insults and had no time for people like that. Now? I’ve been through it, seen it all, doing this [home-educating] I’ve met all sorts. And you know what? They’re no different from us. I take everyone as they come now and I’ve time for them. I’ll talk to anyone. This has really changed me.”

Shifting, searching and finding God/Jehovah

Change was particularly noticeable in the families interviewed twice. One family interviewed were later emailed for an update. Asked how things were, they responded that:

“We found Jesus.”

Parents (NOT) compromising on their dreams and ambitions

Whilst home-education was not always the easiest path that parents could have taken there was little evidence to suggest bitterness or compromise. All but a few parents seemed satisfied with the choice they had made. Mrs Knight, for example gave no hint of what ‘used’ to be, yet watching her cook and cater for four children in a tiny crowded inner city flat, exhausted but still retaining traces of former elegance, was a poignant reminder that this mother had exchanged a high level job with one of the glossy magazines for life on a low income, devoting years to her children’s education. Despite the many ambitions that had been reassessed to accommodate home-education, only two parents mentioned their decision in relation to their plans:

“Home-education is not as I imagined. I never foresaw special needs.”

“My child’s special needs curtailed my dreams and thwarted my ambitions.”

These parents nevertheless chose to devote more time to their children than would have been the case had the children been in school. Parents who questioned the necessary compromise were most probably those who did not remain home-educating for long or who at some point, chose to place their children in school.

Counter-intuitively, perhaps, it appeared as if home-education actually liberated families, women particularly, of social norms, whereby, once they had ‘stepped’ outside the ‘doors’ of institutionalism they were free to ‘do it their way’ – this was a view espoused by Holt and one for which he was severely criticised (Cochran 1999). As one mother said:

“We do what we want, when we want.”

And another:

“Home-education is hard work. There’s lots of preparation behind the scenes but you get the reward that you taught your child.”

In the following quotation, the mother’s own liberation is evident:

“Home-education is a realistic and exciting option. It frees you and your children from dependence on the education authorities, in and out of schools. We did not start to home-educate by choice. Our son was becoming frustrated with his failure to learn reading, despite being in a small class. My mother-in-law was staying with us and gave him a lesson. After his first lesson he came out and said, ‘It’s OK mum, Grammie can help me. We were launched.’”

SOCIALISATION AND SOCIAL EFFECTS: THE CHILDREN’S SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS.

The need for socialisation, fact or fiction?

Socialisation was important to parents. This was evident by the efforts they made to ensure that their children did not suffer as a result of having less exposure to their peer group than might have been the case had they been at school. Parents mindful for the children’s circumstances often appeared to hold an exaggerated idea of the need for socialisation. There was even an undertone of what Cassidy (1998) describes as over-parenting, where school parents fall victim to the cult of desperately seeking social experiences for their children at the expense of their own logic.

The children however, untainted by contemporary thoughts on socialisation, did not always share the parents’ concern that socialisation was of such significance. The mother continued:

“My daughter recently rebelled and we now spend a fair amount of time with just me and her at home, at her request. This is not what I envisaged, I’m not even sure it’s what I want now, but I’m riding with it for now.”

Several families described themselves as always being the ones to make the effort where friendships with other families were involved. They thought it likely that since their children were not at school, the other children who were did not always think to include them in invitations.

Social Exclusion

In a number of cases, social exclusion arose as a result of living at some distance from the town and other children, rather than because the children were home-educated. Few parents were aware of parents of schoolchildren discriminating against their children.

Where parents were ‘different’, this may have been catalytic in their decision to home-educate which, in turn, may have caused a level of social exclusion. One family described a type of social exclusion that was more a consequence of lifestyle than of the decision to home-educate and it was this social exclusion that had brought about the decision to home-educate in the first place:

[Mother] “At school they would not let Andrea join in swimming. I took her out of school one day a week. We are vegans and so I sent her with packed lunch. Andrea would have wholemeal bread. She doesn’t eat sweets and the others were sweet mad. She missed a half of one school year through illness. At school it was hard to give medicine 3 times a day. She was taunted for being a ‘comer in’. At school she felt that if she didn’t go to church she would be bullied. They called me a pagan.”

A different culture

Some of the non-native British⁴ parents (n= \geq 26) held views on socialisation that were less symptomatic of wanting to ‘fit in’ than those of the native British Caucasians. Possibly, with different cultural origins it was easier to be accepted as different. As one person in authority told the researcher:

“You know I was not aware until recently they home-educated but when I found out, I wasn’t surprised. After all her husband is coloured and the children might get picked on at school.”

This family actually home-educated because of their ‘alternative’ values and would have been dismayed by this comment. A Muslim family interviewed found themselves with a dilemma – they wanted their children to mix with Muslim children but in their area the home-educated children were mostly Caucasian. This type of problem, where parents were specific about who they would most like to mix with, sometimes limited opportunities to socialise.

The effect of religious affiliation

In so far as socialisation was a problem, the families with church membership were often advantaged. Interestingly, what was termed by one non Jehovah’s Witness interviewee as, ‘dragging their kids from door to door’⁵, was considered an enriching educational and social experience by the families concerned.

Following Jehovah’s Witness conversion, the Johnsons had new friends that they could call upon.

[Mother] “There are other home-educators in the congregation. We have loads of friends to see now, between meetings.”

During her initial interview for this research, Mrs Johnson had spoken of the family’s detachment from the community surrounding them.

⁴ There were n=17 (in 16 families) Caucasian non-native Britons (e.g. Irish) and n=9 (in 7 families) non-Caucasian native (e.g. Indian descent) and non-native Britons (e.g. Indian immigrant), most of whom were in mixed race relationships.

⁵ A term used by one non Jehovah’s Witness family.

Social Adjustment and Special Needs

Rollo was brain damaged, but his story had much in common with other home-educated children. There was the need for community support and the evident importance of friends; Rollo was fortunate that his childhood friends had remained close:

[Mother] “The children come over, there’s four or five who are the same age, they’ve grown up with him. I have learnt through Rollo, how important socialisation is. Particular children gravitate towards him, perhaps more for their needs than his. One child insists on speaking to him as if he’s four. As for girls, it’s about making opportunities for him.”

Imaginary Friends and their Social Role

Once asked, at least 15 parents and 4 children spoke up on the topic of imaginary friends⁶. Whether imaginary friends were especially endemic amongst the home-educated children in particular was difficult to say: it was quite possible that for those children passing through school age without entering school, their imaginary friends remained longer than the ‘norm’ (Cassidy 1998). It was further possible that the home-educating parents noticed them more than if the children were at school. The value of imaginary friends has been discussed by McCabe (1998), Seiffge Krenke (1997) and Taylor and Carlson (1997). Imaginary friends are said to provide the child with an experimental world where they can test out their theories, explore their feelings and extend their world. Research has shown that:

“Socially competent and creative adolescents with good coping abilities were particularly prone to create such a ‘very special friend’.”

Seiffge Krenke (1997)

Talk of imaginary companions was often peppered with discussion of their children’s imagination, inquisitive nature and self-motivation. For one group of children living a communal lifestyle, their childhood was one of imagination, wildness and abstraction,

⁶ This question only emerged later in the interview programme, hence the number 15 may underestimate the prevalence of imaginary friends.

roaming within 13 acres of rolling woods and farmland, often naked. There was nothing to hinder their imagination and that of their imagined companions. Their existence was both frightening and idyllic, reminiscent of ‘Lord of the Flies’⁷.

TIGHT STRUCTURE V DISORGANISATION

Order

Most families trod a middle path that was neither very structured nor very haphazard although there were two exceptions. The Blyth family were organised. There were four children and the family lived in a detached estate home with ‘everything in its place and a place for everything’. The children were calm, polite, controlled and quiet. Mr and Mrs Blyth were serious and intent but friendly people. There seemed to be an orderliness that had been planned for, in an arrangement that never went wrong. The Blyths were one of the most unusual families in that they followed a timetable that ran all day, to the clock.

Disorder

Kat and her family epitomised chaos and presented as great a contrast as one could imagine to the academic Blyths. Kat, mother to five children, had tried home-education but gave up because as she explained candidly, she had not been willing to make the necessary adjustments. The family were travellers, residing in a rented ex-council property at the time of the interview. The dwelling had the telltale signs of itinerancy within – a converted ‘live in’ truck parked up on the front garden, peeling wallpaper, ragged mats on carpetless floors, chattels heaped around the walls of each room with a central space devoid of furniture. Clothing and hairstyles too, were testimony to the family’s New Age lifestyle.

Talking with Kat it was apparent that she believed that her successive pregnancies had stalled her artistic and entrepreneurial spirit.

“I started a degree but got pregnant. I’ve always planned to finish it. I’d like to do art work but there is too much chaos. I’d like to be alone to work. I don’t get much work done. I get low in energy.”

⁷ William Golding: Lord of the Flies (1954)

Kat was busy with five children, three of whom were under the age of five: the disorganisation was obvious. She had begun home-educating with the best intentions and possibly as an antidote to her inadequacies, yet was let down by her own inability to control her own life. During the visit, the researcher sat on the only, decrepit chair that could be summoned; family members moved in and out of the interview like mercury moving up and down a thermometer, epitomising the transient disordered nature of the whole family. There was though, a happy ending to the home education, as twelve-year-old Maia explained:

“I wasn’t getting anywhere. Maths and English I was doing by myself. Granddad sent me some history papers. I went to Saturday club activities and a philosophy group and home-education activities. I’m not keen on the ‘EO’ things. We don’t have a TV but there’s a computer. I went to two schools and then tried home-education but it didn’t work, I’ve no motivation. I’m at a school now where I don’t have to go to lessons or meetings unless I want to. The teachers are friendly and we call them by their first names. I’ve been there two months and I’ve made some friends.”

FORMAL V INFORMAL LEARNING

These two quotations illustrate something of the dichotomy between these two approaches to learning:

[Mother 1] “If your child is already in school it is a really big decision to take your child out of school. I find the home-educators here fall into two camps. The ex-teachers who decided school wasn’t for them but like myself take schooling seriously, and the others who don’t want to do anything. There’s one parent with a ten year old who doesn’t read. I find this depressing.”

And,

[Mother 2] “A year before school started, late September, the LEA sent a list of local schools. We shelved it. At first Mike suggested filling it in just in case but I pointed out that we have passed the last two years dithering and now was the time to make a decision. We had not met anybody by then, just a few families but no one who we had anything in common with. Others seemed to be doing school at home. That was what they said. One family did 5 days of 3 hours/day and then took a week off; they were born-again Christians, evangelicals praying to Jesus.”

As the interviews and assessment programme unfolded, it became clear that there was a difference between what families said they did and what they actually did. Here, Mr Kealy discusses a family who used to home-educate:

“They bought lots of books and it’s difficult if you do that. I believe in the John Holt⁸ thing. I wanted to believe it would just happen but sometimes have wanted them to do things. Now I believe in letting them read what they want. I think there’s no need to sit them down.”

Martine went on to contradict her father:

“My daddy gets lots of workbooks. We normally read books.”

Informality to a large extent depended upon where and how the family lived. Many families, particularly those outside the cities, led lives whereby the children had almost continual access to the outside. One very devout and large Christian family were farmers, hence, despite the structured approach and adherence to ‘lessons’, the children were able to spend time working or playing on the farm. The following family was not wealthy but they did live rurally:

“Sarah often spends hours in the shed alone. The children are remarkably happy with their own company. They like building dens and climbing. I am quite robust and able to help make things, carpentry etc. Better at it than my husband.”

⁸ Author of ‘Teach Your Own’. See bibliography.

ADAPTATION TO CHILDREN'S NEEDS, PERCEIVED MOVE FROM CURRICULUM-CENTRED TO CHILD-CENTRED

Integral to the shift felt by families was movement away from the initial starting point in terms of how the home-education was 'administered'. Some families, in particular those who have withdrawn their children from school, moved from an intention to 'teach' their children towards a stance whereby they 'facilitated' their children's learning. To some extent, teaching/learning/facilitating style changes were to be expected: children were growing up, there were children of different ages in the family and all the children were individuals.

Direction of shift in term of formal-to-informal or formal-towards-informal very much depended upon the age at which home-education started, as a parent explains:

“As Helen has got older she has wanted more and more structure.”

Those home-educating children from birth usually became more formal as the children grew up whilst families withdrawing children from school tended to initiate with an intention of keeping abreast of school but gradually relaxing into a pattern that suited the family. Formal or informal, families tended to be regulated by the seasons and the school calendar which impacted on some of the home-educating families' outings and activities. Even formal families accepted that different children needed different approaches:

“We have moved from formal towards informal; originally with Jane I thought I should do 5 hours a day. We did implement that for a month. Now we have a vague structure to the week ahead, although this is very flexible.”

Attempts to replicate school were often short lived:

“I began with workbooks. I was organised. It lasted a fortnight. We were ready to kill each other.”

Meighan (1995) and Thomas (1998) have emphasised this latter direction in depth, although they do not discuss the reverse shift evident with families who home-educate from birth, whereby they move towards formality as the children grow older. Molly’s mother described their experience:

“We tend to do lessons. At first I tried to and went towards, autonomous learning. We first introduced structure at five-ish. It was my feeling that we should.”

In reality, none of the home-educating families visited could be described as ‘curriculum-centred’. The very nature of home-education indicated that families held their children to be central to family life, duty and reason d’être.

ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION OF CHILDREN’S PROGRESS AND THE TENDENCY TO UNDERESTIMATE IT.

There tended to be equal division between families who shunned assessment and those who welcomed it. Christians were often keen to be aware of where their children were up to academically. Families whose children were learning more informally tended to speak about rejecting evaluation. Nevertheless, only one family in the entire assessment programme (Rothermel 2002, 2004) refused an assessment on ideological grounds and it seemed that most families welcomed the knowledge about where their children are academically. Agreement to assist with the assessment based programme may have centred upon parent’s desire to co-operate with home-education research but more than this, there was a sense that families welcomed the researcher’s interest in them and they welcomed an external assessment of their children. Beneath the defensive ‘we are not interested in assessment’ approach, there was for many, a sense of wanting to have a gauge on how well they, as parent educators, were performing. For many parents, home education is a lonely road; it is the parent who is uniquely accountable. Therefore, confidence in what one is doing needs to be maintained and confirmation, even by a stranger, that home education is working, can provide a sense

of vindication. Other parents were simply curious. In the earlier testing programme parents had been asked if they would like to receive their children's results and one parent, referring to this choice, complained:

“I didn’t mind her doing your test. She wanted to, but I didn’t want to know the results. Now though, knowing you know makes me curious. I’m annoyed with myself.”

Interestingly, the competitive nature seen amongst ‘school mums’ was absent. Without a large peer group to compare with on a daily basis, home educating parents simply didn’t have the competitive basis that school provides (for example, ‘Jonny’s the only one in the class that can’t read yet’). Similarly, whilst schools value the teacher’s formal qualifications, home educating parents largely made no reference to whether they felt ‘qualified’. Most believed that parental commitment was the dominant ‘qualification’ and the assessment results set out in Rothermel (2002 and 2004) appear to justify this view.

Parents were often surprised by their child’s ability. Initially this seemed astonishing but as the study progressed it became clearer how this came to be. It transpired that the tests given in Rothermel (2002) focused on skills that the children did not practise regularly with parents, but which they were nevertheless able to transfer to other areas of learning. Whilst the following child did not take any assessments her example illustrates this notion well.

‘My four-year-old wrote out three names yesterday. Even I could read them. One was ‘Jonathan’ – he’s a friend of ours. It’s a long name and I was astonished. I have seen her write the initial letter of her name but I did not know she could actually write. We have never sat down together to write anything, ever. I’m not entirely sure how this happened but I am exceedingly proud.’

Home-educating parents, Christian or otherwise, tended not to assess their younger children formally, instead giving more credence to the value of informal learning. This was an attitude that prevailed whether the family adopted a structured or unstructured approach. This did not mean, however, that parents were very sure of themselves: they often had nagging doubts about just how well the children were progressing.

CONCLUSION

Despite an abundance of interesting and insightful research into home education over the years, the view, epitomised by Education Secretary Blunket (1999) in his Labour party conference speech continues to permeate:

“Conference, a child not in lessons is a child not learning.”

(Blunkett 1999)

The government sponsored, ‘Review of Elective Home education’ (Badman 2009) concluded that home educated children were more likely to be receiving an unsuitable education and more likely to be at risk than children nationally and Lord Soley wrote in his blog (2010), “The more home education spreads the greater the danger”. Moreover, Ofsted (2010) notes that amongst Local Authorities, “there was a bias towards returning children and young people to school” (p.16).

Both Ofsted (2010) and Badman (2009) emphasise the need to find out why people home educate. The idea is that if we know the reasons, we can address them and (re)integrate children into school. In many discussions with Local Authorities over the years, this researcher has heard the phrase, ‘home educating for the wrong reasons’, as if this were an ill awaiting cure.

The interviews discussed here give an insight into the abundance of views held by this very diverse set of people. What emerges is that attempts to establish and address the reasons why people home educate through a simple ‘type’ approach, such as ‘religious reasons’, ‘bullying’ etc. is a fruitless and flawed methodology. Badman (2009) writes:

“I believe it is important for local authorities both to analyse and consider why an increasing number of parents are choosing elective home education both for the betterment of children services as a whole and the monitoring and support of electively home educated children.”(p.12)

However, Badman, as others before (Hopwood et al 2007), exhibits a persistence in misunderstanding the basics of home education. That is, that there are no simple answers as to why people chose to home educate. Not only do reasons change over time (sometimes very quickly) but the motivations and reasons will often have emerged over many years. A parent may well cite, ‘bullying’ as a reason to home educate. However, whilst it may indeed be a factor, it may not be the cause. Rather, the parent has probably given a convenient answer (perhaps from a set of options) to a simple question. Labels that create categories are useful for those with financial and controlling interests, such as local governments, whose education budget increases with pupil numbers and who may therefore, develop initiatives to persuade certain ‘types’ of children into, or back into, school. As long as this approach continues, the needs of home educators and their children may never be met. Goiria (2009) emphasises the irrelevance of grouping home educators:

“There are as many reasons to educate at home as there are families who opt to do it [...] It is certain that no one is questioning the motives of those who send their children to school [...] It is taken for granted that the question is as redundant as “Why do you feed your children?”

Goiria’s comparison raises the question ‘Why?’ Why do we want to know the reason people home educate? And why does every new study ask the same question? Over many years, commercial companies have approached this author asking about ‘types’ so that they can market their product. A cynic would suggest that Local Authorities are doing the same. These parents have opted out of an endeavour that funds local government and in doing so, present the Local Authorities with a problem:

“The number of home-educated children is very high and has risen rapidly over the last academic year. [...] Those currently registered with the local

authority are effectively monitored, but, with the large increase in numbers over the last year, the resource to carry out this function is insufficient.”

Ofsted, (Isle of Wight) (2006) (p.22)

Arguing against Ofsted's (2010) emphasis on finding out why people home educate, the Parliamentary Education committee Chair Graham Stuart argues that onus on local authorities should be “to serve and support, rather than catalogue and monitor”, home educators.

The detailed interviews with 100 home educators described above, many of whom were visited twice over a 9 month period, provide an overview of a group which is fluid and transient at all levels of process. Families begin home education for a reason that very quickly changes, even that initial rationale is likely to be a response to many unconnected and innocuous events; they continually alter their approach according to the philosophical and physical changes within the family, the changing needs of the children, and the changing ages of the children. Physical changes can relate to changes in family size, divorce, changes in partners, partner gender, location and parental age. Schools do not have to continually adapt to the level of change that is integral to the home educator and his family. Home education is an unavoidably dynamic process, unique in UK education. A school teaches the same curriculum day after day, regardless of the families whose children they enrol.

The research described in this paper is some years old, but this author has continued to work in the field and observes that as long as the popularist notion that links home education to school dissatisfaction prevails, the opportunities afforded through the study of home education, such as assessing the value of a later school starting date, or alternative, innovative approaches to learning, will continue to be missed.

Paula Rothermel formally associated with the University of Durham, a chartered psychologist, continues her work as an Expert Witness in court cases where home education is an issue, in the UK and abroad.

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