



OMEP Research Update

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Why are English Parents choosing to home educate their children?

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Following the decision by a family member, who had been a primary school teacher, to home educate her children, I decided to explore why parents took this decision. My grandchild had attended preschool and a state nursery class before being withdrawn from statutory education. Her two younger siblings have no experience of the English education system nor of preschool or nursery. Not having personal experience or access to home educators the best way to explore this phenomenon was to conduct an online survey and follow up interviews.

It is not against the law to home educate (H.E.) your child here in the UK whereas in other parts of the world it is, including nine of the E.U. countries but the 1996 Education Act states that it is a parent's duty to provide an efficient, full-time education that is both aptitude and age appropriate (Kunzman 2012). The Department of Education does not publish data about the number of H.E children in England but the Office of School Adjudicators found that in January 2020 there were 60544 children registered as home educated. Registration is not compulsory therefore it could be assumed that numbers exceed this figure. Children who have never been part of the system are unlikely to have been registered.

The survey produced 223 respondents, who came from diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds, and broke down into three groups:

1. Those children who had never been in statutory education
2. Those whose children had been off-rolled
3. Those whose children had been to preschool/ nursery but not moved into statutory education.

The survey asked parents what for them was the purpose of education as this would be closely linked with the view of the child which is complex and socially and culturally constructed. (Moss and Urban 2016). Parents views illustrated four themes. A parent said *“I think education is primarily about learning to how to learn”*, It was felt that knowledge is necessary to facilitate rational decision making, flourishing and surviving in society. Many parents viewed education as preparation for adulthood, crucially saying that it was essential to *“compete in the world of work as an adult and to have a successful life pursuing a career that interests you.”* Others wanted education to produce happy people who would be confident and self-motivated and who could fulfil their potential resulting in *“Happy well-rounded people who would lead a fulfilling life and who would be adaptable to different cultures and lifestyles”*. Other parents wanted education to develop a love of learning so that learning was a joyous, passionate experience that enabled children to *“follow your interests in order to live the life that you want”*.

Seeing education as necessary to learning how to learn sees the child as a blank slate to be filled with knowledge so they can become a fully functioning adult. Modern neuroscience has demonstrated that newborns are not blank slates and that learning begins prenatally with babies being active learners from birth (Oates 2012, Healy 2011). Views of education as a preparatory process shows the influence



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of the government's neoliberal agenda where the child is seen in terms of 'human capital' who will meet the needs of the capitalist global agenda and become a consumer. It sees the child not as a citizen but in the process of 'becoming' which leads to an educational focus on outcomes rather than the quality of children's everyday experiences (Qvortrup et al 1994; Qvortrup 2008). The child is a passive recipient of knowledge that the adult believes is essential to meet society's economic needs. Parents who saw education in terms of personal fulfillment echo Gatto's (2017) beliefs that it should be a voyage of self-discovery. This perspective leads to a pedagogy where adults and children work and learn together or to autonomous education as followed by believers in unschooling. Parents wanted children to develop a lifelong love of learning to encourage their curiosity, allow them to explore the world and become critical thinkers and problem solvers. Hernik and Jaworska (2018) say that when children enjoy their learning it makes for better outcomes which is good for both personal fulfillment and society.

Reasons that parents, some of whom were professional educators, chose to H.E. reflect those in the Updates Article by Kemp (2011) and worryingly reflect the findings from multiple researchers over the last ten years (Morton 2010; Rothermel 2011; Smith and Nelson 2015; Shohel et al 2012). One of the primary reasons parents chose H.E. was a dislike of the English education system. One parent said that they had "*fundamental disagreement with every aspect of the school system.*" Whilst another described it as being about "*indoctrination and institutionalization.*" Schools were seen as under pressure to conform to government policy rather than acting in the best interests of children. It was described as "*an artificial environment far removed from real life.*" Parents felt the school environment fails to support curiosity and engagement whilst arguing that "*learning does not need to be forced on people as it is in school.*"

Parents said that the curriculum, driven by the government agenda, is restrictive, lacks flexibility and gives children little opportunity to follow their "*individual passions.*" The syllabus encourages "*robotic learning and unquestioning obedience,*" and is not child-led. It is too pressurised so that "*children are pushed into learning things before they are ready and teachers have to rush through subjects to keep up with government guidelines.*" Parents whose children were younger wanted children to be more actively learning through play. The Early Childhood Forum (2014) Charter for Early Childhood stresses that play-based education should be available to every child under seven. Palmer (2016), supporting a play-based curriculum to age seven, argues introducing children to complex cognitive concepts before they are ready is ineffective. The need for a play-based curriculum has been largely ignored by government.

Parents argued that the competitive nature of English education adds to the pressure for children to achieve better results than their peers leading to mental health issues. One parent said "*Anxiety/depression. Her anxiety around school became so bad she attempted suicide. My child's mental health was more important than her education*" The lack of well-being has a long-term impact on the nation's future resulting in a loss to the economy and costs to the health service. Pyle and Hassell (2018) state that children's levels of happiness have fallen to 80.5% in 2017 with an increase in children experiencing emotional distress, anxiety and depression. The early school starting age impacted parent's decisions to H.E. with one saying "*the British system starts formal education far too young for their developmental wellbeing.*" A parent described her twins nightly and morning distress which made separating from them at school a harrowing experience. Their energy levels were impacted which limited their engagement in other activities. Children who struggled to settle in reception classes, lost their previous love of learning and displayed changes in behaviour at home



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along with a child who was so anxious he/she spent most of the day hiding and another who was kept in a playtime to finish work were described. These incidences all applied to children under seven years of age. One parent said that she had children for a reason "to be a mum" and she did not want to hand them over to others. She felt that she could teach her children in a fun way and that they would make friends with children of all ages. This was an argument put forward by other parents because in the H.E. groups their children attended children's ages are mixed and this was seen in a very positive light.

Parents stated that education focuses on academic attainment with too many tests and exams starting at an increasingly younger age. Research shows that tests and grades are sources of children's anxiety which has an impact on their motivation to learn. Frequent testing and grading leads children to feeling inferior and losing their self-confidence when their marks are not comparable to their peers. It also gives children the message that success depends upon other's opinions rather than a sense of self-accomplishment. The system of rewards and punishments is disliked as are rules and regulations around appearance and uniform that inhibits children's self expression. Homework creates pressure and limits the time children can spend doing family activities. Parents had concerns about the considerable staff turnover in schools and poor quality teaching and classroom management abilities.

Parental dissatisfaction with the failure of schools to meet their child's additional needs was a primary driver in the choice to H.E. Crucially this indicates a breakdown in the system for supporting vulnerable children. Parents described how a school was unable to support her child's medical needs which meant that she had to go to school frequently to give the necessary medication resulting in her losing her job. Another described how school was unable to adapt or adjust the learning requirements for her son with Down's Syndrome and would not listen to positive suggestions from them. This increased the child's anxiety and led to changes in behaviour resulting in exclusion. Some parents were advised by their local authorities to H.E. their child, with one paying for virtual school because they could not meet the autistic child's needs. Education welfare officers and educational psychologists recommended parents to H.E. whilst one school told parents whose child was both autistic and dyslexic "It was inhumane for our child to remain in school without the correct support even though he had an E.H.C.P." Schools have a legal duty to recognize, evaluate, monitor and provide support for children with health or learning difficulties but assessments for an E.H.C.P. are being refused or delayed right up to the 20week deadline. Each local authority (LA) is awarded an annual grant for children with additional needs as well as the pupil premium however The School Run (2019) finds that the £6000 S.E.N. grant comes from the normal school budget which means that many fail to find the necessary finance. Research by Weale and McIntyre (2018) found that LA's have difficulty understanding the legal framework which results in them making poor decisions and failing to deliver their legal obligations. Failure to support these children leads to increased problems for society, loss of tax revenue because parents cannot work, increased welfare costs and more health expenditure (Kassa 2015).

Gifted children also have additional needs and parents of gifted children felt that their children's needs were not being met. As a society we often argue that bright children will always do well but without the right levels of support then they will not achieve their potential (Freeman 2001) Supporting this argument a parent said "He is a gifted kid & I did not want him falling behind, the school were letting him float about and gave him very little direction. Finding out that his teacher didn't even know he was doing an end of term group project alone." Children who finished their work early were given identical rather than a more challenging task or they were used to help less able peers. H.E. is particularly demanding and challenging for parents of a gifted child. One interviewee takes her child,



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a preteen, to science lectures at the local university. Another described teaching her children herself before the days of the internet. Her early teen is now at a specialist music school and the older sibling at university studying politics and law. This successful outcome raises the question of the loss of stimulus to children and staff from this lack of appropriate provision, although not at the cost of using the child as a learning support assistant.

Unacceptable bullying incidences right across the age range from preschool to seniors made parents remove their children from school and decide to H.E. Issues with bullying were passed off as banter before escalating into serious issues where children experienced physical and sexual assault leading to hospitalization. Not only incidences of bullying between children were reported but also bullying by staff. One parent wrote "5/6 year old assaulted by the head teacher." but did not give further details that would have allowed me to explore this further. Another parent described "Youngest child bullied by another child resulting in bodily harm, teacher ignored our concerns until we were forced to go to the head, teacher then turned on our son instead, belittling and taunting him causing him to close off from everything becoming sad and despondent at 5 years old" The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 19 and the Equality Act 2010 states that children should be protected from abuse whilst article 3 states that institutions are responsible for the care and protection of children in their care. Arguably schools are institutions who should be complying with this legal framework.

A few parents made the decision to H.E. before their children were born. A minority chose to H.E. because of their religious faith, fearing that their beliefs and values would not be respected in schools neither would they make adaptation to dietary restrictions.

Parents who H.E place high value on their family lives and the freedom that homeschooling gives them. They like the fact that learning can be tailored to the needs of each child. Children's learning in H.E. takes many forms with some parents adhering to the national curriculum and children doing structured lessons at home. Others follow different curricula or none and some do lesson whilst others believe learning happens through the participation with daily experiences. The overall message was one of allowing children to follow their own interests, learn at their own pace and be happy and productive future citizens. This study reflects findings in Kemp 2011 and researchers in home education across the last ten years, including my own research (Morton 2010, Rothermel 2011, Smith and Nelson 2015, Mitchell 2020, Shohel et al 2021). This raises serious questions about our current education system that do not appear to be being addressed by the government.

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