

Family transitions, 'special' education and home education

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Recent years have seen families of certain schoolchildren encouraged to deregister and begin home education. Ofsted (2019) considers the practice to serve a school's purposes rather than children's best interests. The Children's Commissioner (2019) suggests teachers lack training to identify additional needs, or resources to support them.

Communication difficulties between teachers and parents of children with learning differences have been examined in the past (e.g., MacLeod & Tett, 2019). This research focuses beyond school on the circumstances, transitions and processes that can lead some UK families to home educate. The study explores complex and nuanced sequences of events driving families to undertake home education. It seeks to understand their transitions within home education – the networks they join or establish, and the resources and practices they employ.

Home educators can be portrayed as operating outside accepted, or even acceptable, norms of society and the education system (Pattison, 2016). Arguably, children with 'special educational needs' and their families have long found themselves excluded in - and outside - school (Ranson, Martin & Vincent, 2004). This study investigates experiences of families at the intersection of 'special' education and education 'otherwise [than at school]' (Education Act, 1996:4). The research question is:

What circumstances inform the transitions of families *to and within* home education?

The study follows the British Educational Research Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2018) and the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014). Research methods: the design, participant recruitment, survey wording, participant information and consent documentation and procedure for withdrawal were reviewed and approved by the OU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

To ensure the schedule of questions would authentically reflect participant perspectives, parents were consulted whose children attended school before beginning home education. Data collection prioritised ethicality, accessibility, and considerateness. The online survey, planned to be convenient for many home educators who confidently use the Internet, collected 93 responses (68,513 words). Interviews were conducted with seven parents and six children (69,371 words). The application of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), systematically and iteratively, was intended to enhance this process.

The researcher combined Turner's liminal theory (1969) with his stages of social drama (1974) and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model and proximal processes (1995a, 1995b) to develop a unique analytical framework that gives voice to participants' circumstances and insights into their marginalisation and transitions. This framework has potential as a tool for schools to understand the experiences of children and families.

Findings reveal cumulative, sometimes protracted, and traumatic processes, leading to discord, crisis and eventual schism between families and schools. These processes, and the fractured relationships that result, can push families to home educate. Sequences of events reflect aspects of Turner's (1974) ritual, with discernible stages in what can be considered a social drama, where initially liminal actors move from discord through crisis to develop a sense of community and more confident home education practice.

Parents' initially high expectations of educators' professional expertise seem, to some extent, based on their understanding of equality law, education policy and statutory guidance. This contrasted with subsequent parental perceptions that teachers were not qualified to recognise some children's needs, and schools were unwilling to support or unable to include certain children. Reportedly, schools variously encouraged, or warned against, deregistration. Parents appeared to lose faith in those they had previously seen as experts, professionals to whom they had entrusted their children. Over time, these parents, driven to support their children, came to develop their own knowledge and understanding, both of their children's needs and of alternative methods of education, often initially online and later assisted by other parents. Some participants reported ongoing conflict, both within their work, family and community networks, and in the way home educators are viewed in the media and wider society as operating outside accepted educational norms.

Reflecting the co-productive approach used for the schedule of questions, recommendations arising from the study data were shared with home educators to evaluate their relevance. These focus on inclusivity – training for teachers and schools; re-evaluating government terminology around home education, and guidance related to flexi-schooling; the development of a suitably experienced local authority home education advisor role; and access to local authority education resources, including related to national examinations. Implementation of the study's framework offers a lens for schools to evaluate their relationships with families, and for teachers and other professionals to meet their institutional and ethical responsibilities towards children and their parents in the future.

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