

Family transitions, ‘special’ education and home education

In the decade before the first Covid-19 lockdown, the numbers of children deregistered from school to begin home education increased annually ([ADCS, 2021](#)). Concomitantly - noted by Ofsted ([2019](#)) - certain schools were encouraging parents of children with so-termed ‘special’ or ‘additional’ needs to deregister to avoid permanent exclusion and/or fines for non-attendance, because the school considered home education would better suit the child or young person, or while waiting for a specialist placement. Before these stories broke in the media,¹ as a specialist teacher for students with specific learning differences (SpLDs), I was approached by parents striving to meet their children’s needs at home, when schools appeared to have failed them. These encounters, and subsequent work with the children, motivated my research. My aim was to understand the circumstances informing families’ transitions to and within home education ([Gillie, 2022](#)). Data were gathered through a series of interviews with four families including seven children, three parent-only interviews, and the responses of 92 parents and one young person to open questions in an online survey. One survey respondent went on to participate in a family interview.

UK home education research is not new; academics and home educators themselves have long explored aspects of the practice and those undertaking it. Half a century has passed since celebrity gardener [Dick Kitto](#) coined the term ‘compensators’ to describe families turning to home education following negative experiences at school (Blacker, 1981, cited in [Rothermel, 2002](#), p.41). More recent is the growth in school deregistration, particularly of children with identified or suspected learning differences. My research found that families - who may have found themselves excluded from school and related social activities – are viewed as operating outside society’s norms whilst not yet belonging to wider home education networks. This was accentuated last year when I shared my research findings at the [Home Educating Families’ Festival](#) and a speaker referred to such families as ‘refugees’ from the school system. As survey research participant Lucy explained:

¹ For example, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jun/21/thousands-of-pupils-missing-from-english-school-rolls-study>

I find it very difficult that so many people have a negative opinion of our decision and freely tell us so. Our families haven't been supportive and a neighbour voiced her strong opinion in the street, in front of our daughter and made me feel like a terrible parent. People on buses and in shops frequently ask our daughter why she isn't in school and I feel apologetic and frequently mumble something non-committal... I've tried searching for part-time schools and for home-education classes that we could attend but all I've managed to find is a group of teenage meet-ups based quite far away from us.

Such comments show how new home educating families might find themselves marginalised, perhaps harder to bear for families convinced that schools had left them no alternative but to home educate. Interviewee Minnie's assertion, 'I didn't bring me here, the system brought me here,' was reflected in the statements of survey participants:

I have had no choice but to home educate.

We were left with no other choice.

The government's terminology 'Elective Home Education' seemed to exacerbate some parents' sense of frustration:

There is nothing elective [about] our home education.

This is NOT elective home education.

This was not elective.

I refused to de-register her as I was not going to be forced into 'elective' home education'.

From these unfavourable starting points, families developed as home educators:

Home Education has been the saving of my son and our whole family. He is now absolutely thriving. His relationships both within and beyond our family have been transformed. We have NEVER looked back it was the best thing I ever did. Wish I had never sent him to school in the first place.

We didn't choose [home education] but we have learned so much... Ours has been a story of moving from a negative to a positive and seeing our daughter finally take off as she should. I did have to sell my business and make some huge changes and yet the outcome now is a positive one.

The responses of 99 families illustrate how relationships with school breakdown and offer insight into ways school and professionals might improve such interactions for

the benefit of children and young people. Fellow educators and academics are invited to continue the discussion at the 2024 BERA Conference.

References

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