

Alternative education: inclusion beyond the mainstream

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This panel responds to February's review of alternative provision in England (CQC & Ofsted, 2024) and June's BBC investigation revealing that numbers of UK children moving from schools to home education are at their highest levels since covid (Hattenstone, 2024). Our discussion focuses on a critical yet often overlooked area in education: the educational rights and experiences of children learning outside the traditional school system. Our question is: In a neoliberal education system, how can children's educational rights be safeguarded, if they have not been met in schools?

The Education Act 1996 (p.4) mandates that every child of compulsory school age must 'receive full-time education suitable to [their] age, ability, aptitude, and any special educational needs [...], either by regular attendance at school or otherwise'. Children and young people in alternative provision and home education comprise the largest proportion of this 'otherwise' category. As we head towards 2030, and in context of the UK 2024 election result, we consider the extent to which such children and young people receive an inclusive and equitable quality education, UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The numbers of school-age children and young people leaving mainstream schools has increased year-on-year over the past decade and accelerated in the post-covid period (Gillie, 2023). This increase, and the overrepresentation of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is acknowledged by the Westminster Government (Long & Danechi, 2023). At the same time, heightened demand has resulted in long waiting lists for alternative provision (AP) settings (Smith, 2023). Arguably, this highlights a critical gap in provision of educational quality and equity. Our discussion considers this in light of government reviews and legislative proposals of recent years, questioning what next for these children under the new parliament.

To date, government consistently states its support for the right of parents to home educate (e.g. Long & Danechi, 2023). However, discussions regarding compulsory registration of home educated children have been ongoing in the 2010-2024 period, since Badman's (2009) review. Provision for a home education register was expected – but was eventually not included – in the 2022 Schools Bill, though it had been recommended by the cross-party House of Commons Education Committee (2021) in their report *Strengthening Home Education*. Establishing a register remains a priority for the current education secretary (Long & Danechi, 2023). The Education

Committee (2021, p.36) repeated the 2012 committee's recommendations for fair and funded access to examination centres for national qualifications, also a priority for home educating families (Gillie, 2023). There appears to be a tension between monitoring what home educators provide and enabling home educated children and young people to access qualifications.

Whereas the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) expects most children's and young people's needs to be met in mainstream schools, Ofsted (2019, 2021) recognise a pattern of neurodivergent students' experience of exclusion and off-rolling, often moving to home education. Arguably, provision for these pupils should be made through state-funded AP. However, the AP sector is under pressure both in terms of places and quality of provision, and has been since the 2011 review, before the 2014 SEND reforms, as noted in the recent review (CQC/Ofsted, 2024). The review criticises the lack of national standards or clarity in AP commissioning and oversight, leading to inconsistent and often ineffective practices, especially with increased numbers of unregistered AP provisions.

The neo-liberalising and concomitant marketisation of our education system has led to a focus on performativity, with parents as consumers rather than citizens. Pratt (2016, p.899) warns that a culture of measuring and assessment renders children's academic results can be seen as a 'good'. by which teachers' professional success is measured. In this competitive structure children with SEND become 'non-marketable commodities' (Blackmore, 2000, p.382). Posthumanist thinker Braidotti (2013) suggests that disability and difference help to disrupt these dominant discourses because they offer a glimpse of what a world could look like that is based on values such as interdependence rather than competition.

As more students move away from mainstream education, we must question the rising demand for alternative education and explore what constitutes high-quality provision. In this context, colleagues across BERA SIGs with experience in and research and practice perspectives on mainstream and alternative settings, SEND and home education will discuss these issues and share findings from practice and current research, focusing on mental wellbeing, inclusive education, and informal education, will enrich the discussion. This timely discussion addresses current gaps between educational policies and practices, highlighting the importance of inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for all children.

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