

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘It feels like we’re out of the rat race’: Family reflections on traumatic school experiences leading to home education

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Email: sarah.gillie@uwe.ac.uk**Abstract**

The rise in numbers of children experiencing school attendance difficulties in recent years makes this an important focus for UK school inclusion. Simultaneously, increases in school deregistration in favour of home education have caught media as well as regulator attention. These figures disproportionately include children on schools' special educational needs registers. This article presents findings from a doctoral study of families' reflections on their educational transitions leading to school deregistration and undertaking of home education. Through a UK-wide online survey and interviews with seven parents and six children, the research explored the experiences of 99 families. Participants described cumulative traumatic events and liminal experiences as they sought inclusive education, negotiating with under-resourced and/or underprepared professionals in unsupportive or even hostile systems. The study employed reflexive thematic analysis using an original Bronfenbrenner–Turner conceptual framework to understand the data. The framework underpins the research recommendations and has potential for policymakers and as a school inclusion tool to help educators and allied professionals recognise and support—rather than ostracise—vulnerable children and their families.

KEY WORDS

flexi-schooling, home education, school attendance difficulties, school deregistration, school inclusion, teacher education

Key points

- Patterns exist in the reported school practices and educational transitions of children and families across mainland Britain.
- Families form expectations of schools based on their understanding of teachers' professional standards and educational policy.
- Educators lack confidence in implementing school inclusion, and this is a finding that reflects the existing literature. Further training could enable schools to collaborate with families in children's best interests.
- Some families see flexi-schooling as a school inclusion strategy for their children. However, schools are reluctant to offer this, due to Government requirements for marking days at home as ‘unauthorised’, which affects attendance figures and funding.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The doctoral research reported by this article was motivated by working and volunteering with neurodivergent children and their parents. I met families who had fought for their children to be supported in schools before reluctantly beginning home education. As a teacher supporting learners with specific learning differences (SpLDs), I wanted to understand what happened to precipitate these transitions away from schools.

Home education has been defined as ‘the full-time education of children in and around the home by their parents or guardians or by tutors appointed by the parents or guardians’ (Petrie et al., 1999, p. 6). Ray (2024) reports increasing numbers of home educators around the world and notes that the practice can be considered mainstream in the USA, with the proportion of home-educated children and young people at around 6%. Current estimates of 126,100 home-educated children in England are equivalent to 1.4% of numbers enrolled in schools (DfE, 2024a, 2024b).

Other than when quoting, I avoid diagnostic labels, terminology or acronyms such as ‘special educational needs’ (SEN) or the relevant nation’s various terms. This is for clarity and to avoid the unquestioning use of vocabulary that can pathologise, medicalise, disable and/or marginalise. Whereas Government publications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland refer to ‘elective home education’ or ‘EHE’, news media often refer to ‘home schooling’. Most participants had not *elected* to home educate and had transitioned *from* school. Therefore, as in Scotland, I use the term *home education*.

Home education is legal across the four UK nations, and related research spans decades (e.g. Pattison, 2023; Petrie et al., 1999). However, UK home education is not generally well known or well understood. Bhopal and Myers (2018) suggest school attendance is widely accepted as a responsibility. Perhaps this contributes to what Lees and Nicholson (2017, p. 306) call home education’s ‘marginali[sation] by ignorance’ through prevailing media representation and due to the limited official information available to parents.

To answer the research question: ‘What circumstances inform the transitions of families to and within home education?’, the study investigated transitional experiences at the intersection of ‘special’ education and education ‘otherwise [than at school]’ (Education Act, 1996, 7). The study explored how 99 families across mainland Britain came to home educate as a last resort (England: 61; Scotland: 13; Wales: 17; not specified: 8). This article acknowledges differences in the devolved nations’ education systems; however, there were similarities in stories from participants across England, Scotland and Wales.

Previous home education research considered families’ motivations and practices in home education (e.g.

Rothermel, 2002). However, the current study is believed to be the first focused specifically on the educational transitions of UK families and predominantly neurodivergent children. Children’s deregistration—removal from the school roll—was precipitated by failures in school inclusion and/or securing flexi-schooling. Children who flexi-school enrol part-time and are home educated and/or attend another provision—for example, a specialist dyslexia setting—on other days.

While the proposed Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill intends to establish a register of all children not in school, except in Scotland, there is currently no legal requirement for UK families to record their intention to home educate. Thus, extant local authority registers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland represent children who were previously enrolled at schools and those whose parents have voluntarily registered them. Ofsted (2019) and the Children’s Commissioner (2019) have raised concerns about the overrepresentation of children with ‘special’ needs in England’s deregistered numbers. In some areas, the proportion of education, health and care plans (EHCPs) is up to 10% of known home-educated children, double that of children enrolled in schools (ADCS, 2021).

Policy informs parents’ anticipations for their children’s education. For example, England’s SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) expects inclusive practice and collaboration between schools and families. Yet teachers’ and schools’ capacity to ensure inclusive practice remains in question (Knight et al., 2023). Recommendations from research into children’s school attendance difficulties have tended to focus on therapeutic interventions for individuals (e.g. Elliott & Place, 2019). From a practice perspective, it may be more widely beneficial to explore changes for implementation in settings.

School inclusion and home education in England

While this section focuses on England, similar inconsistencies exist across UK nations (Knight et al., 2023). Rutherford (2016) suggests a disconnect between the policy and practice of school inclusion, whereby schools and educators perceive and accept themselves as ill-equipped to support students who require ‘special’ provision. Education policy such as the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) highlights the importance of planning for educational transition. However, Galton and McLellan (2018) note that the neoliberal focus on performativity affects schools’ practices around educational transition. They link this in part to academisation, where schools are state-funded but run independently of the local authority.

Local government has legal responsibility for assessing children’s ‘special’ needs. This is highlighted in Section 22 of the Children and Families Act 2014 and England’s SEND Code of Practice:

Local authorities must carry out their functions with a view to identifying all the children and young people in their area who have or may have SEN or have or may have a disability.

(DfE & DoH, 2015, p. 23, emphasis in original)

Such duties are imposed although the 'local education authority' ceased to exist following the Education Reform Act 1988. Ball (2018, p. 321) considers that resulting, often competing systems of funding and accountability are 'centralis[ed] and fragment[ed]', even 'incoherent[er]'. Azpitarte and Holt (2024) suggest this is the combined result of poor implementation locally and insufficient funding nationally. Perhaps unsurprisingly, discrepancies between what inclusion policy appears to promise and what schools seem able to provide may result in 'warrior parents' who must fight for their children's educational rights (Ofsted, 2021, p. 15). Further impacts may include a loss of trust between families and schools and the education system itself (Bormann & John, 2014).

Schools are accountable through a neoliberal education culture focused on academic results (Ball, 2018). This has a direct impact on children's experiences: at the beginning of this century, Blackmore (2000, p. 382) warned that individual children might be viewed as 'non-marketable commodities'. Pratt (2016, p. 895) reports that certain pupils have a lower 'value' based on schools' beliefs about their academic potential. Such a culture inevitably affects teachers' relationships with children as well as their parents (Vincent, 2017).

Inclusive schools and practice exist; Hallett and Hallett (2024) note that some mainstream schools can and do meet the needs of all learners. However, rather than inclusion, exclusion is more likely for children who have been identified as having special needs. Beynon and Thomson (2024) report that 96.9% of children permanently excluded from primary schools had been on their school's SEN register, including 48.2% who had been awarded a Statement of SEN or an EHCP.

Rutherford (2016) argues that legal and policy terminology conceptualising 'special' education can marginalise the children and young people it is designed to include. Norwich (2019, p. 2) reflects on 'dilemmas of differences', balancing the risks of learner stigmatisation with provision of targeted support. Nettleton and Friel (2017) warn that legal 'special' education frameworks do not guarantee that children's educational rights are met, a point conceded by Ofsted (2021). England's Children's Commissioner suggests teachers lack training and resources and that children who are considered to perform poorly in standardised tests are at risk of being 'abandoned by schools' (Children's Commissioner, 2019, p. 8).

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, concerns were raised about 'off-rolling'. Schools have encouraged parents of certain children to deregister and avoid exclusion or fines for non-attendance, or while waiting for a place at a different school (Long & Danechi, 2020). Ofsted (2019) considers that schools do this to improve their academic results and attendance figures. Concerns over attendance figures appear to affect the extent to which schools offer flexi-schooling. Gutherson and Mountford-Lees (2022) consider flexi-schooling a workable partnership between schools and home-educating families.

METHODOLOGY

Design

Inspired by Plowright's (2011) integrated framework, the research design adopted a multi-method approach. An online survey with 10 open questions was used to gather qualitative responses across UK nations. This was intended to be convenient for busy home educators and to add breadth to the data. For depth, parent interviews and family meetings were planned to fit around participants' schedules. Children's participation incorporated the use of concept maps as an accessible way to record what was important to them individually. The original design proposed a series of 'go-alongs', where the researcher joins an already-planned everyday activity with participants (Evans & Jones, 2011). Due to Covid-19 lockdowns, only two go-alongs with families to their home education group activities were possible, and one family interview was conducted online, via Skype.

The same open questions were used for the interview schedule and survey. These were designed in consultation with four of the parents whose children's experiences had inspired the study—home-educating parents of neurodivergent children who had previously attended schools. This was important for the first part of the research question: 'What circumstances inform the transitions of families to home education?'

Early co-production in the research process was intended to ensure questions were relevant and respectful, and to minimise potential power imbalance between participant and researcher (Thomas-Hughes, 2018). For the same reasons, at the end of the study, along with interview participants, these parents were invited to provide feedback on the study's recommendations.

This article focuses on responses to the first four questions:

1. What did you anticipate about your child/children's education before they reached school age?
2. What circumstances led you to home educate?

3. What happened once a decision to home educate was made?
4. Please share anything else you would like to about your child/children's school experience.

Data comprised participant responses to the survey, interviews and follow-up emails, researcher field notes, and analysis of children's concept maps, as well as letters and photographs shared by families. [Table 1](#) shows survey participation by 92 parents and one young person, and face-to face participation of seven parents and six children. Overall, the research data represent experiences of 149 children and young people and their families.

Recruitment and participants

Invitations to take part in person were posted with the survey link and my university email address on Twitter, and via my professional blog. I contacted the administrators of relevant closed Facebook groups. Several of these gatekeepers ignored my request or were reluctant to share it with their members; others asked additional questions before sharing my links further. Such use of online channels may account for the apparent breadth of responses. However, it is acknowledged that this is likely to have narrowed the self-selection pool.

No questions were compulsory, and open textboxes allowed participants to share as much detail as they wished. Most participants additionally responded to some of the demographic questions required by the university. Self-identified survey participants and interviewees were one non-binary parent, four male and 90 female parents, located in England (59), Scotland (14) and Wales (11). In line with the research ethos outlined in the introduction, no question referred to children's diagnoses; however, 66 parents shared this information.

Survey participants were allocated numbers S1–S93, in chronological order of participation. The survey concluded with an invitation for interview participation. Three participants made contact, of whom one went on to be interviewed with their child. In all, six mothers (England: 2; Wales 4) and one father (Wales) took part in semi-structured interviews. Six children from four of the seven families took part in research conversations (England: 2; Wales: 4). The families who had not already taken part in the survey made contact after seeing research recruitment information online, or receiving the

invitation, forwarded through their home education networks. Interview pseudonymisation was by participants randomly selecting from pre-prepared name cards.

Ethical considerations

Conscious of intersectionality and aligned with my personal and professional position, the study design looked to guard against marginalisation of potentially already disenfranchised families. British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018) were adhered to, and design, participant recruitment, information and consent documentation and procedure for withdrawal were reviewed and approved by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee.

In recruiting and researching with children, the study followed guidance from Alderson and Morrow (2020). The responses of a GCSE student were included in the research data out of respect and meeting their participatory rights under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989). To promote participating children's informed consent, the early research conversation explained the purpose and stages of the research, including recording, transcription, and eventual dissemination. Children's questions were actively invited.

Member checking

Families reviewed their transcript(s), resulting chronologically presented cases and children's concept maps as discussed by Chase (2017). Artefacts and any revisions were combined with field note observations to write each case study.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with parents were based on the co-constructed questions. Research conversations with children focused on two questions:

1. Please tell me about what being at school and learning at school was like for you.
2. What can you tell me about learning at home or on visits out with your family?

Where parent and child stayed together, at times the other family member would add detail, so that responses were collaborative, as described by Reczek (2014). Children's participation included concept maps to accessibly confirm their contributions (Novak & Cañas, 2006).

That methods should suit participants rather than the reverse was intrinsic to the study's ethos (Carr-Fanning & McGuckin, 2017). Each child chose the format,

TABLE 1 Overview of data collection methods.

Methods	Parents	Children/young people
Online survey	92	1
Parent-only interviews	3	–
Family interviews	4	6

structure, and content of their concept map. Three drew and wrote, used card shapes and sticky notes; of these, two dictated what they wanted to say. Three used the mapping app Inspiration. Five were created alongside our research conversations, and the online participant chose a template from the app and asked me to create hers following our Skype call.

Data analysis

The research aspired to respect participants' lived experiences and recognise the ontological impact these may have. Out of epistemic reflexivity I acknowledged my personal and professional background as parent and teacher. This informed the application of reflexive thematic analysis to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The iterative nature of this process through familiarisation, systematic coding, grouping, checking and mapping enabled ongoing refinement and analysis. This required—and supported—both deep immersion in the data and the development and maintenance of consistency, in keeping with 'Big Q' reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 165).

Data revealed that marginalised families' actions were informed—even driven—by school interactions. To conceptualise this, the study developed a new Bronfenbrenner–Turner theoretical framework. Turner's (1969, 1974) liminal theory and phases of social drama encapsulate participants' sequenced experiences on school margins. Families navigated this alone and often unsupported until they met experienced home educators who provided Turner's 'communitas'. Combining this with Bronfenbrenner's (1995) refined bioecological systems theory incorporating proximal processes and the impact of the *process–person–context–time* (PPCT) model enabled analysis of the situations families found themselves in and of relationships between children and teachers, and between parents and professionals and/or school-related systems.

In essence, Turner's liminality, *communitas* and phases of social drama reflect *how* and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model reflects *why* families undertook or underwent transitions (Gillie, 2023). The four themes developed through reflexive thematic analysis

and the application of the theoretical framework are shown in Figure 1:

1. the school-related *circumstances* of families;
2. the *processes* families undertook and underwent in their quest for inclusive education;
3. families' *transitions*, predominantly from school and into home education; and
4. the establishment of home education *practices*.

Turner's liminality frames children's school transitions and parents' experiences in unfamiliar educational contexts, without the benefit of *communitas* from school staff or other parents. Families whose experience does not fit the typical pattern can find themselves 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1969, pp. 95–96). Progression through phases of Turner's social drama can be eased by *communitas*, through 'breach'—renamed *discord* in this work—and 'crisis', to possible 'redressive action' for 'reintegration'. Where this is not possible, eventually there comes 'social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism' (Turner, 1974, pp. 38–41).

Educational policy requires co-production in children's best interests; this was expected by participants. Such interaction reflects Bronfenbrenner's positive proximal processes in the school microsystem, and mesosystemic interdisciplinary collaboration. The reality described by families is presented in the next section. Parents remained open to discussions with schools, at the onset of *discord* and through crises, to help their children stay in school or reintegrate through redressive action. These processes were either dysfunctional or absent, culminating in deregistration from school and home education, illustrated in Figure 2.

FINDINGS

Hopeful transition to school

In their responses to the opening question: 'What did you anticipate about your child/children's education before they reached school age?', parents referred to traditional educational pathways, inclusivity and

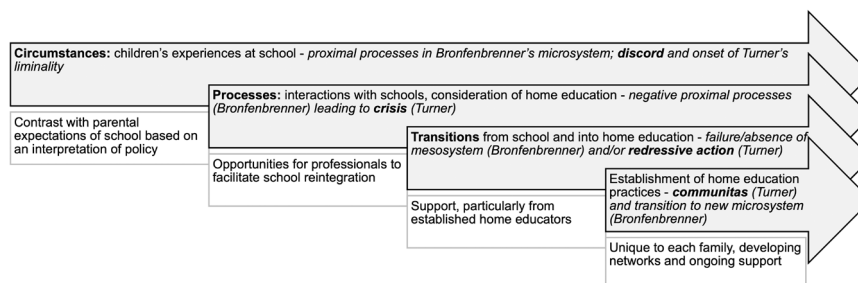


FIGURE 1 Themes developed and application of theoretical framework.

a love of learning. The latter aspiration was referred to by a quarter of survey participants, with five parents using the phrase 'love of learning'. S1 wrote: 'They would have a love of learning and achieve to their best ability', and Ramona replied: 'I just thought she would love it'. S69 hoped 'they would have a warm, understanding and inclusive experience ... that their education would be enjoyable and that their teachers would be kind and understanding'.

Discord—Disappointed expectations

Children talked about fairness at school. Rainbow felt school could be unfair because 'teachers just ... get annoyed sometimes and ... they'd be shouting'. Teddy complained of her twin sister being told off unfairly: 'it happened quite a lot to [Hermione]'. The sisters participated separately, and Hermione corroborated.

Matilda outlined her primary school experiences:

I used to get really stressed ... Because if I rushed it, then I would end up mashing sentences together and it's, 'what you're doing is wrong' and ... they would always say, 'take your time'. But as I got to the end of the lesson, they'd always yell at me for not doing enough ... and it was just really stressful.

The concept map Matilda created to illustrate her perceived differences between school and home learning experiences is shown in Figure 3.

School experiences reported by these young participants were reflected in parental accounts shared through the survey. Participants described children's schoolwork being discarded, for example, 'ripping pages out of his books because they were messy' (S19) or 'ripping her hard work up in front of her due to too many mistakes' (S31). Whether or not time has affected such memories, parents' concerns for their children's education and welfare were clear.



FIGURE 2 School deregistration as a social drama.

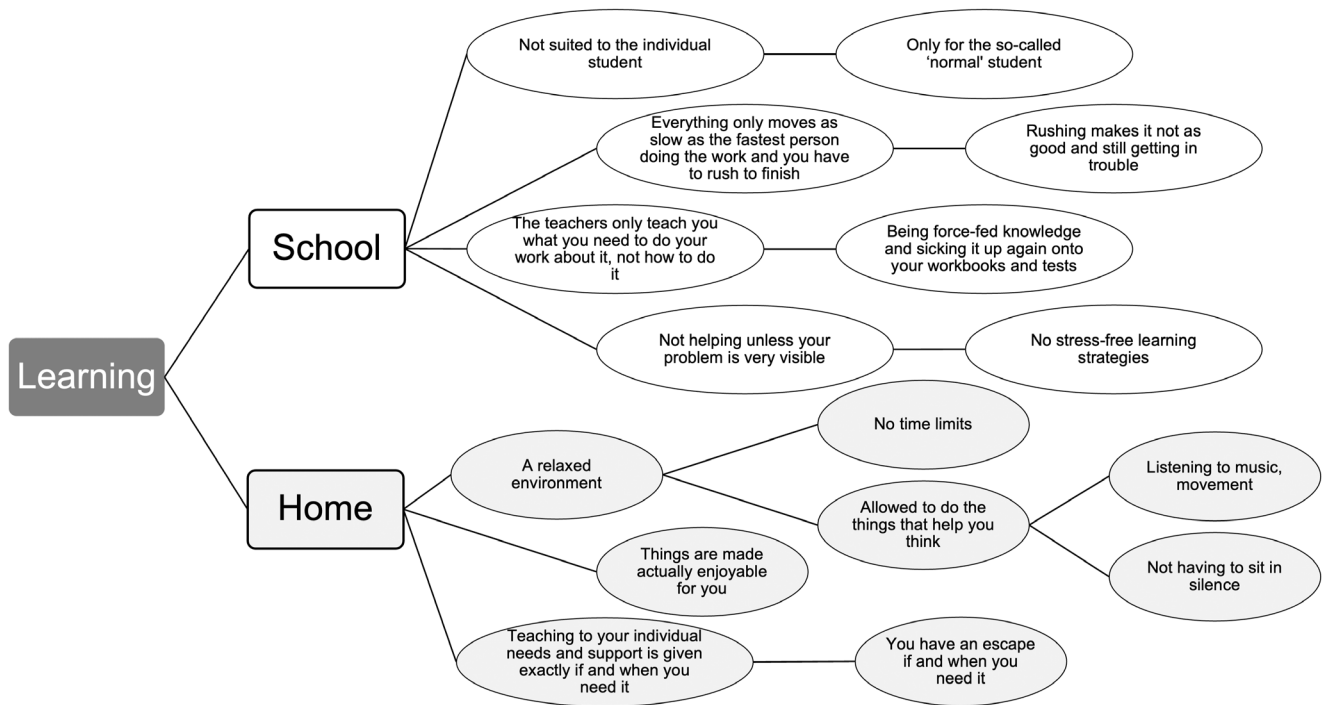


FIGURE 3 Concept map created by Matilda, aged 12.

Some parents were not initially aware of schools' views of their children's developing academic skills. They were surprised to be informed of these in their first parent consultation meetings. S15, a health professional with multiple postgraduate qualifications, wrote of her child's being 'written off' by her teachers halfway through Reception year, aged five. She explained experiences leading to deregistration:

My child was so unhappy, every evening trying to prepare things for the teacher to prove she was worthy of leaving the 'stupid table' ... She had always enjoyed books; the final straw came when her grandma suggested reading one of her favourite books with her and she sobbed, adopted the foetal position and told us she can't read and would never be able to.

Participants referred often to inclusivity and the responsibilities of schools or teachers in that regard. S23 considered that 'education would be inclusive ... educators would know how to be inclusive'. Like S39, parents assumed 'a normal progression through school'. These beliefs informed families' hopeful transitions into the school system. S10 alleged 'false promises [of] school-based law', reflecting tensions between parents' expectations and their evaluation of children's school experiences. Schools seemed inconsistent or remiss in their implementation of Government guidance and statutory frameworks as parents interpreted these, which appeared to lead to or worsen discord in family-school interactions.

Exacerbation and crisis

Participants experienced difficulties in communicating with schools and teachers. Close to three-quarters of deregistering parents felt their children's needs had been misunderstood or dismissed. For example: 'School did not believe me and refused to put support in place ... in spite of [the] paediatrician asking them to' (S8); 'School ... couldn't or wouldn't support him' (S18); 'The school failed to understand or meet his needs despite a diagnosis' (S26).

S8 heard of her son's apparent academic needs at a parents' evening, when she was told she 'needed to do much more work with him at home if [she] expected him to catch up'. In common with other participants, she recalled his self-esteem worsening as family-school relationships

deteriorated. Being in trouble for 'not trying hard enough ... damaged his confidence and essentially made him feel like he was different from the other children'.

In such cases, parents felt children's behaviour was punished, though participants believed this was a direct result of unmet needs and could have been avoided through timely provision of support. One parent—a teacher who had secured a place at a school with small class sizes for her dyslexic son—said that his 'needs [were] not met, [causing an] increase in anxiety which led to behaviour difficulties and extremely low self-esteem. School [was] far more concerned about the behaviours than the cause' (S2). His eventual exclusion meant she had to reduce her own working hours and rely on family members and paid tutors for her to continue working at all.

Parents described failed meetings as they sought support for what they saw as their children's educational rights. For instance: S28 attended 'years of meetings and his mental and physical health declined'; S29 reported 'fighting school for support for two years'; S33 'had repeated discussions with school but nothing changed.'

Figure 4 shows the school-related experiences most often discussed by parents, with most parents feeling their children's needs were not understood, and half of participants detailing two or more types of events.

Missed opportunities for reintegration

Parents reported children's increasing anxiety and reluctance to attend school: 'the longer we stayed at school, the harder it became to get him to go' (S78). This was attributed to schools' reluctance or inability to support children's learning needs; for example, S1 explained that her son's 'dyslexia [was] not supported, leading to [his] mental breakdown'. Jack recounted Molly's night terrors that abated following deregistration. Minnie explained that Hermione's weekly term-time sickness bouts had started in Reception. The school lacked resources for a referral, so the family had arranged a private educational psychologist assessment. This confirmed dyslexia and referred to the NHS for diagnosis of autism in the years before deregistration.

When sickness affected Matilda, her doctor considered it was anxiety-related but recommended dietary change to eliminate other factors. School absence due to sickness seemed to elevate Matilda's stress further as she worried that 'everyone thought I was just faking it and [they thought]

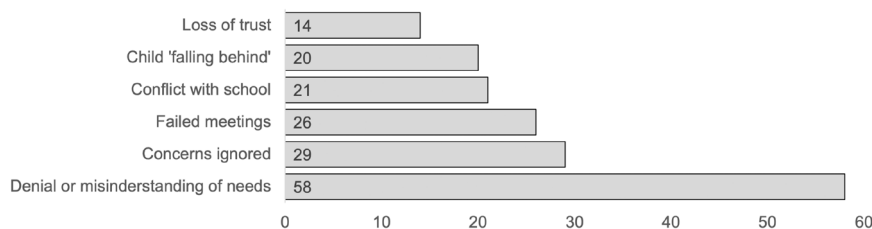


FIGURE 4 Parents' school experiences.

I just didn't want to go to school. Ramona reported the doctor's diagnosis, and the school referred Matilda to the education welfare officer and said further school absence due to sickness would *'go down as an unauthorised absence and ... ten of those, then you get fined'*. Ramona asked the school to refer Matilda for dyslexia assessment and support, and she was told that this would only be available if her daughter's attendance improved. Despite Matilda's difficulties developing her academic skills, a family history of dyslexia, and repeated parental requests throughout primary and secondary school, she was never referred to the local authority educational psychologist.

Parents acknowledged the education system's limitations related to funding, staffing and training. S44 considered *'the general view ... is that schools should be experts on identifying common learning difficulties—they clearly were not'*. S32 concluded, *'it is very disappointing, but also very realistic to reach the conclusion that our mainstream schools struggle to support good mental health'*. S35 reflected, *'it was hard not to blame the school, but being a governor, I knew it was the system and Ofsted causing this'*. Minnie described her reaction to the final school meeting after five years:

I d[id]n't even want to continue the discussion with [school] anymore ... I'd gone from meetings at the local authority to phoning the Children's Commissioner, phoning the Equality Commissioner. I was going to make a ... complaint under the Equality Act.

This breakdown in communication was reflected in the accounts of others. For example, when S6 shared a video of her son's post-school distress with the headteacher, she responded, *'It doesn't happen at school, so it's not my problem'*. S15 deregistered her daughter after a meeting where the head *'offered no solutions but said she would be contacting social services if I kept bothering her—this was the second time I'd spoken to her'*.

School deregistration

Just three families negotiated flexi-schooling arrangements whereby their children attended school only for certain days or subjects. This was not available to everyone; others' flexi-schooling requests were refused. Hermione's weekly attendance at an independent specialist dyslexia school had been supported by her primary school, but permission was later withdrawn.

Children were deregistered when it became clear that support was not available in the way that families envisaged. For example, S86 shared:

Eventually we pulled him out of school before the whole family broke down, and after the headteacher admitted she had fought for six years to get her son the help he needed

in school. I just felt if the family and my son were in such a mess after three months, I feared for us if we had a six-year fight ahead of us.

Despite these difficult relationships with schools, most families moved only slowly towards eventual deregistration. Some participants reported exploring the possibility of home education through *'hours and weeks of research'* (S17). Others decided to trial home education *'just for the year'* (S44), or even *'for the summer holidays'* (S84), only deregistering at the start of the new academic year. Parents' commitment to obtaining support for children in school—rather than at home—is clear in the language used. S73 described *'Fighting to get any recognition, support. Fighting for EHCP. Fighting for assessments'*, and S83 reported *'Fighting the [local] authority for our middle child to attend specialist school'*.

Several families found themselves reluctantly designated home educators following children's exclusions from school. S1 recalled repeated suspensions as *'terrible, traumatic experiences'* before her child was permanently excluded and *'just ... left with us'*, with no clear communication from school or the local authority. The need to be at home with her child led to losing her job and having to apply for benefits. A teacher whose older children had completed school was critically ill and in hospital when she received a call. She was told to collect her Year 10 son whose dyspraxia had originally been identified at primary school: *'They excluded him for a week with a view to permanent exclusion. I had his dad collect him that day and he never went back as school were adding to the trauma and stress by not being sympathetic to the situation'* (S30).

Another teacher had to give up full-time work when her son was excluded and said home education *'was forced on us'* (S4). In common with other participants, S30 described school meetings lacking the co-production expected by policy; she felt *'pressurised ... to "do something" without giving any indication as to what they wanted/needed, and I felt bullied myself'*. Such parents emphasised the involuntary nature of first undertaking home education, rejecting the phrase 'Elective Home Education' used officially: *'there is nothing elective [about] our home education'* (S23); *'this is NOT elective home education'* (S41); *'this was not elective'* (S58).

S21 kept her daughter enrolled at school as the family sought an alternative school placement: *'I was not going to be forced into "elective" home education'*. Families' staged processes leading to deregistration are outlined and mapped conceptually in [Figure 5](#).

(Re)integration

Without support at school level, families often found themselves adrift until they developed their home education

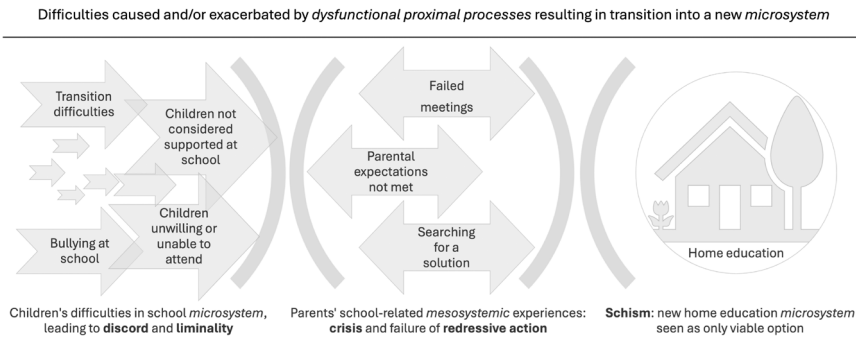


FIGURE 5 Families' liminal processes and transitions between microsystems.

practice, supported by experienced home educators in local groups and online. Regarding undertaking home education following Matilda's significant school-related difficulties, Ramona reflected, 'It feels like we're out of the rat race, out of that competitiveness, all the expectation'. Similar sentiments are evident in survey responses to question 3, 'What happened once a decision to home educate was made?':

We followed his interests, and he started to thrive academically, and his self-esteem rose as he realised his strengths were being supported. (S8)

I began to research ideas and activities to do with him at home, and I got in contact via Facebook with local home education groups. We met up with other home educating families, many of whom are still friends now 6 years later. (S19)

Families described their intentions to reconsider school or college in the future. For example, Minnie discussed with her children that they could enrol at secondary school when the time came in case 'we decide that we would like them to go'. Participants described older children's reintegration. Further education tutors remarked to S19 on her son's independence as a learner. Tim's son completed GCSEs at home after a failed secondary transition and then attended a local sixth-form college before university.

DISCUSSION

Participants revealed the precarity of access to reasonable adjustments for their children and support for families in the current educational systems of England, Scotland and Wales. Research findings suggest that some parental expectations might be based on their understandings of education policy. Reported school behaviours reflect discussions in the literature on how professionals can neglect to consider

children as individuals and/or may perceive children as units by which a school's success is measured. As noted, four themes were developed through analysis of the findings and application of the study's conceptual framework. This article focuses on the first three: circumstances, processes and transitions. These relate to the first part of the research question: 'What circumstances inform the transitions of families to home education?'

Circumstances

Participants had expected children to enrol and remain in school. Parents were disappointed when the reality of their children's educational experiences did not match expectations based on policy and guidance available online. This tested families' trust in education, as discussed by Bormann and John (2014). Children's growing unhappiness and/or inconsistent support at school constituted a failure to meet the conditions of the assumed contract in a marketised school system (Vincent, 2017). These findings reflect the warnings of Ofsted (2021) that unrecognised or unmet learning needs can lead to combative relationships between schools and parents.

Processes

Parents were prepared to collaborate with schools, informed by publicly available information such as the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015). Vincent (2017) suggests one impact of neoliberalism in education is an expectation of parental responsibility; however, she acknowledges that teachers may not have time to communicate with families and work with them effectively. This can be seen above in parent reports of their exchanges with educators as they sought inclusion for their children. Notwithstanding funding or implementation difficulties acknowledged in the literature, for example by Azpitarte and Holt (2024), instead of seeking to defend their position, results from this research suggest that education professionals might usefully look to collaborate further with families when such situations arise.

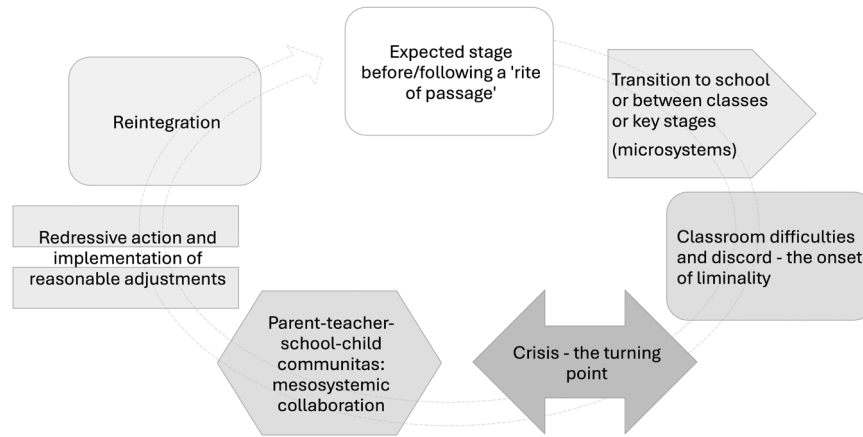


FIGURE 6 The Bronfenbrenner–Turner framework as a redressive cycle.

Transitions

Some families felt they had been left with no alternative but to home educate, sometimes following years of attempts to negotiate assessment and support for their children. Others began home educating as an emergency measure, for example following threatened or actual exclusion. In all, six families were able to negotiate flexi-schooling arrangements for their children of the sort described by Gutherson and Mountford-Lees (2022). Five of these resulted in successful long-term placements, with one child transitioning full-time into secondary school. Fourteen further families had been unsuccessful in requesting this of schools. Additionally, 26 families described the use of tutors, either in person or online. This seems to confirm the suggestions of Gutherson and Mountford-Lees (2022) that flexi-schooling might be a workable solution for more children, were it available.

Applying the study's framework as a redressive cycle rather than a linear process offers schools, practitioners and policymakers a way to better understand families' experiences and to develop their responses to children's school attendance difficulties. Educators' recognition of and response to learners' or families' liminality could help to avert crises and enable redressive action through implementation of mesosystemic collaboration and reasonable adjustments. This is illustrated in Figure 6.

Recommendations

The study's recommendations arose from the data and were developed in consultation with families who had taken part in interviews or contributed to the schedule of questions:

- As for safeguarding, educators should receive specific and ongoing mandatory training in inclusive practice and working collaboratively with children and families.

- To enable flexi-schooling, offering and recording this should not impact on schools' funding or attendance figures.
- Local authority home education advisors should have experience and/or training in inclusive and alternative education and support schools as well as families.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has revealed the uncertainty of access to support for some neurodivergent families and their children who deregister, and home educate. This is important, given the current media and political focus on school attendance and the SEND system in England particularly, though research findings and recommendations are relevant across the UK nations. Policy and professional standards require inclusion; however, as noted in the literature, currently this does not always guarantee its implementation in schools. Policymakers should carefully consider the education system and related infrastructure to account for necessary resourcing, so that future policy can be better enacted in the service of the children it is designed to support and protect.

The small scale of the study is acknowledged, as are the limitations of online research with self-selected participants. Future research should include a direct focus on young people's lived experience, and work to understand deregistration from the professional perspective of schools. Both are needed to promote 'reintegration'.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are available at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22732145.v1>.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research, including all participant information and consent, was reviewed and approved by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC, reference number HREC/3030/GILLIE). Data collection and storage comply with University and GDPR requirements.

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