

Home education: Constructions of choice

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Abstract

Families who choose to home educate generally do so due to dissatisfaction with school-based education. Common perceptions of home educators oscillate between images of the 'tree-hugging hippy' and the 'religious fanatic'. Whilst attempting to go beyond such stereotypical dichotomies, this paper will examine three very different groupings of home educators and their varying constructions of childhood and the social world, demonstrating the spectrum between home education as an expression of human rights and of fundamentalism. The first grouping construct home education as a 'natural' choice, often presented in political opposition to existing social structures. For the second grouping home education is predominantly a 'social' choice relating to the conscious transmission of various forms of capital. Finally there are 'last resort' home educators for whom home education is not perceived as a choice. Based on qualitative research, this paper will argue that, even where home education is constructed as natural, the social aspects and impacts of home education choices cannot be ignored.

Keywords: Educational Choice, Lifestyles, Alternative Education, Home Education, Homeschooling

Introduction

Home educators are not an homogeneous group (in fact it is debatable as to whether the term 'group' is appropriate due to their fragmented nature), and there is no one way of 'doing' home education, methods of home education are at the parents' discretion. Home education is a growing but under-researched phenomenon in England and Wales. The 1996 Education Act (Section 7) states that parents are responsible for ensuring that their children received an 'efficient' and 'suitable' full-time education. There is

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no clear definition of what is meant by an 'efficient' and 'suitable' education—something which has at times led to conflict between home educators and Local Authorities (Baker, 1964; Monk, 2004; Petrie, 1992). There is also no legal requirement for home educating families to register with their Local Authority meaning that the number of home educated children at any one time can only be estimated, with widely varying results (M. Fortune-Wood, 2006; Hopwood, O'Neill, Castro & Hodgson, 2007), although there are some indications that home education is a growing phenomenon in England and Wales. The parameters and characteristics of the home educating population therefore remain unknown. Common perceptions of home educators are of social 'misfits': either 'tree-hugging hippies', religious fanatics or 'hothousing' parents determined that their offspring should achieve academic excellence at an early age. My research and that of others suggests that the reality is much more diverse and complex and that home educators cover a broad spectrum between and beyond the stereotypes often presented.

This paper examines three different ways in which home educators construct their choice to home educate, as either 'natural', 'social' or 'last resort', and concludes by arguing that although the choice to home educate is constructed in different ways by different home educators, there are common themes running through those choices which have wider social implications beyond the home education arena.

Methodology

The paper is based upon data collected as part of my PhD research between June and December 2007. Qualitative data collection methods were employed, mainly through unstructured interviews with 19 families and one Local Authority official, but also through participant and non-participant observation at various home educators' meetings and a week's participant observation at a large home educators' annual camp. Overall, 40 to 45 families participated in an intensive way in my study sharing their lives and experiences of being home educators.

The research focuses predominantly upon home educating parents: whichever way families presented their constructions of childhood, choices around home education were almost entirely in the hands of the parents, particularly at the 'crunch point' of deciding to home educate. While my research focussed on parents, on the whole I was uncovering the mothers' story. Of my sample, only one father had the main responsibility for home education, two couples initially told me that they shared responsibility equally but later admitted that the mother had a greater responsibility. In one further couple the husband was very involved in educating his children, but in all other accounts of home education in two-parent families the father was peripheral or even completely absent. In order not to exclude the contribution of those fathers who were active in home education this paper

often refers to 'parents', however it is to be remembered in the reading that home education appears to be predominantly a project of motherhood.

Three groups, three forms of choice?

During data analysis three groupings of home educators emerged in terms of the way they constructed their choice to home educate. Home education is an educational choice option for parents. There has however, been little analysis of home education from a choice perspective apart from that by Aurini and Davies in Canada (Aurini & Davies, 2005). Parents invoked many of the rationales for educational choice used by middle class parents about their choice of private school, such as social milieu, acquisition of wider life skills and the transmission of specific values (Kenway, 1990; Walford, 1990; West & Noden, 2003).

The first category identified was those who described education as a 'natural' choice, the second constructed home education as a 'social' choice, while for the third grouping home education was perceived not as a choice at all but as a 'last resort'. There is a degree of overlap and movement between the groups, in particular members of the third group tended to reconstruct their ideas about education over time, gravitating towards either the 'natural' or 'social' groups. The groupings are by no means homogeneous, and not all the home educators I met fit neatly into one category. Indeed, what my rough groupings display is the degree of similarity between a wide diversity of home educators. The groups' different perceptions of their choice to home educate tended also to be linked to their approaches to education, childhood and parenting. The rest of this paper will examine the different constructions of the choice to home educate and briefly explore the characteristics of the three different groups.

Home education as a natural choice

'Natural' was a term used by families within this grouping to describe their choices around childhood, education and lifestyle. In using the term 'natural' they were often referring to a way of life that was outside what they saw as false social structures and often evoked images of an idealised pre-industrial lifestyle. For many of these families home education was part of a conscious effort to reject conventional social structures and conformity to what they saw as a tyrannical system. This often involved positioning themselves in opposition to the 'other' of the state and institutional structures:

We got involved in home education as part of a change of lifestyle, addressing some of the imbalances in the way that we were living. ... Stressful environments and stressful lifestyles, the Western environment is full of stressful lifestyles and stressful diseases. (Alan, Interview).

For many 'natural' families this lifestyle involved a rejection of consumer culture, and a concern for the environment which manifested itself in the adoption of vegetarian or vegan diets and a subsistence lifestyle.

In Alan and Sarah's case this had led them to live in a yurt (Mongolian tent) for the previous two years as part of an alternative community.

For other families the lifestyle choice was less extreme in its difference from mainstream culture: instead of a hostile rejection of mainstream life and institutions, an attempt to improve on it. For several 'natural' families a concern for the notion of family was what guided the lifestyle, with the family seen as the core unit of society and the place where children should be nurtured.

Home education was therefore a lifestyle choice, integral to and often convenient to 'natural' home educators' philosophy of life, rather than being a choice purely related to education (although perceptions of 'education' played an important role). For these families the existence of the formal school system was in itself problematic as it contradicted the lifestyle that they wanted to live.

For several families home education was something that they had drifted into. Rather than organising for their children to go to school they had started home educating, enjoyed it and so had decided to continue, as for Selina who had moved to England from South Africa:

I wanted to keep them home because we were in a foreign country and it was nice to go to the pier together or to do things or to see things, and then I realised that they are getting bored, ... and I realised that they were obviously raring to go more academically ... So I thought OK, so maybe I should find out about the local schools, ... So I found space for Ruth in the one school – 3 miles in one direction and for Liezl in the other direction one and a half miles which I just thought logistically won't work, you know with Mia [a] baby, ... and these two in one direction and then in the other direction and then again 12 o'clock, with four hours difference, there is no way. ... Then I started to think OK I need to stimulate them ...

... And then I started becoming so conscious of if you start school now in the morning at 7 when do you stop school, cos I realised that if we go for a walk you collect different leaves then you go and research what trees it is, ... So I just realised that wow, this is actually very stimulating, ...

... and I thought OK later I might research schools, but I just really got so into it, (Interview with Selina)

Earlier in the interview Selina had talked about her previous dislike of home education. However, having fallen into home education she now described it as 'natural' and fitting closely into the rhythm of family life, allowing her to enjoy time with her children rather than needing to conform to what she perceived as the limiting structures of school life. In Selina's comments there is also the emerging theme of children as individuals in their own right, rather than merely becomings (Lee, 2001) or empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. This was also expressed by Sarah:

Children are seen as empty vessels to be filled up, and I don't see that they are that, I think, my understanding is that they are quite full up and that we empty them in a way, they have lots of innate and intuitive things and you actually systematically get rid of that through systems and structures and things.

For many of these families the school system and its representation of what was often perceived as an oppressive state and/or oppressive capitalist structures was the problem that they were escaping by choosing home education. Home education was therefore a mechanism which allowed parents to protect their children from negative state structures and preserve their innocence. Talking to these families often felt as if I had walked into a reading of Bowles and Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) with references to the long shadow of work over schooling and the production of conformist obedient workers to feed the capitalist industrial project. Others spoke in an almost Althusserian (1972) way of the ideological moulding done by school to children and the use of social services and the education system as a repressive apparatus to restrict and persecute home educators. Accounts and examples of state persecution were rarely recounted first-hand however, and over time I realised that few of the people I spoke to had read or heard of Bowles and Gintis or Althusser, and that what I was hearing was what had become a collective justification and by-line for many 'natural' home educators, fed by some of the popular home education literature and also by key home education activists. This was particularly evident at the home educators' camp I attended, where school as an oppressive capitalist structure ran as a theme throughout.

In addition to the adoption of neo-Marxist viewpoints on the functions of state structures in general, and schooling in particular, there was among these families, without any sense of contradiction in their minds, a strong sense of individualism. This was often to the exclusion of the notion of society and the impacts of individuals' behaviours upon others. There was a strong belief in the freedom of the individual and a child-led approach to education where structures were rejected as constraining and conformity was perceived negatively. Many families aspired to autonomous home education (totally informal and child-led), with parents acting as facilitators for the child's learning interests.

This sense of individualism over community meant that 'natural' home educators tended to operate as independent units with relationships with other home educating families being fluid and transient, existing to meet families' needs. There was often also suspicion of other home educating families, particularly those who were not 'natural' home educators.

'Natural' home educators were ambivalent about the notion of education, often being unclear as to what they thought education was. They were clearer about what they felt the aims and outcomes of education should be, many talked about children fulfilling their individual potential, and there was also a grudging acknowledgement that their children should be able to survive economically:

Charles: Ultimately I suppose they've got to become economically independent haven't they, that's what education is supposed to be for ...

RM: So do you see that as one of the aims of what you're trying to get out of her education is the ability to earn a living?

Jill: Ultimately yes, but also at the moment I think it's just exploring what she wants to explore, and then see where that takes her.

Charles: Yes, you've got to find your interests haven't you, ... then when you've found things that really interest you then you go full steam ahead on those, and if you're successful enough you'll want to earn a living from them and you'll be in that happy position where where your life's work actually earns you a living.

As this indicates, for many families, despite the ideal of an escape from economic and institutional structures, there was an acceptance that economic labour was a necessity for survival and that education should equip children for that reality. At the same time Jill and Charles' comments also highlight the fact that the idea of education as a process of self-discovery and self-interest remained foremost in importance.

Home education as a social choice

In contrast to 'natural' home educators, parents for whom education was a 'social' choice did not see the structures of the formal education system as problematic. Their issues were specifically with the social interactions that they associated with schools, between pupils and with teachers, and the values communicated through those interactions. For many of these families private schooling was seen as an alternative to home education, but one which was often financially impracticable.

All but one of the interviewed families in this group described themselves as 'Christians' and their beliefs and values were central to their choice of home education over mainstream schooling (although there were also Christian families in the 'natural' group). However, other families that I met and talked to during my periods of observation who fitted into the 'social' group were not Christians.

For these families home education was linked to perceptions of parental responsibilities, they saw themselves as having ultimate responsibility for their children's upbringing, both moral and social. Parents felt that they should not relinquish the responsibility to the anonymous and morally ambivalent structure of the school system.

While there was an element of protection in terms of values and morals for these families, it was a different kind of protection from that of both the 'natural' and 'last resort' groups. Few of the parents who were home educating for 'social' reasons expressed serious concerns about bullying in schools (in fact several expressed regret that their children had not been exposed to such dynamics) and the sense of large groups of children as inherently 'unnatural' was not in evidence in the same way as for 'natural' home educators. Instead parents expressed greater concerns about the values that other people's children brought into schools and the influence those children might have upon their offspring:

Unfortunately 'cos of the breakdown of families, especially in what is quite a poor-ish area, you get a lot more moral ambiguity. That Megan and Owain would

have been exposed to all kind of things I didn't want them to be exposed to. So really by the time I was expecting a child I was wanting to have them Christianly educated. (Sophie, Interview)

In many ways these parents echoed the rationales of parents who choose private schooling for their children (see for example Frazer, 1993; Griffiths, 1991; Kenway, 1990; Walford, 1990) as a way of exerting control over what their children are exposed to, especially with regard to they kinds of children they mixed with.

In addition to these 'social' home educators were concerned about the interactions between teachers and students and the fact that a parent could not guarantee moral and value homogeneity between themselves and the teacher:

We had considered home education, I think one of the things that made us consider it more seriously was the things that she was bringing home from school were contradicting what we were teaching her at home. Religious-wise, behaviour-wise, you know there were various things which even the teacher ... for example one situation that happened was one little boy was pulled up in front of the class and told that he was disgusting, ... So it wasn't just necessarily things that were coming back from the children, the teacher had our child for most of her waking hours and so her behaviours were reflected upon our own child. (Janet, Interview)

Janet's comments emphasise the view that came from several parents that they did not want their children 'confused' by receiving mixed messages from school and home. For them the importance of ensuring that their children received the right social messages and internalised the right values were linked to their perceptions of their children as semi-formed individuals and to their responsibility as parents for their children's formation into well-socialised adults:

The children are not in charge of themselves, autonomous education is a thing which I disagree with, the theme which runs through EO [Education Otherwise] is children are just as good as adults well yes they are, they are but they don't know everything yet, and it is our job to train them and educate them and prepare them to go out there so that they can be voting people, be good neighbours, be good work people, at the moment they are still in training and they don't know their own mind. (Tanya, Interview)

Home education was therefore the performance of the parents' duty to give better social conditioning to their children than the school options available to them.

This concern with the interactions over the structures of the education system were reflected in the ways these families tended to 'do' home education. Most 'social' families followed a formal programme of home education, often following a set curriculum (typically imported from the United States) which reflected their value system. One family were at the unstructured end of semi-formal home education with rough plans for progress drawn up each term by the mother and father which were then adapted or abandoned as appropriate. On the other hand, Janet and Sophie

had recreated 'school at home', with school uniforms and a timetable. When I visited her at home Janet was busily involved in organising a sports day for the group of home educators to which she belonged – another aspect of recreating school structures while maintaining moral and social control over their children's education.

Despite the fact that many of these families valued structure and replicated school structures at home, they also spoke of valuing the flexibility of life that home education afforded them. Timetables tended to be dropped towards the end of terms, or they would re-shuffle their work completion targets in order to take a day off for an educational trip or mother-daughter shopping trip. Often these alterations were justified with comments that home education was also about life skills, displaying a broader conception of education than that offered by the traditional school structures. There was also a gentle movement towards more informal educational methods, although not as marked as that noted by Thomas (1998), with the introduction over time of extended project work in addition to more formal curriculum-based work. Like the 'natural' home educators, 'social' home educators also valued the opportunity to individualise their children's education to individual strengths, weaknesses and interests, although to a lesser extent.

Home education as no choice?

For eight families interviewed (and many others encountered) home education had been a 'last resort', rather than a perceived choice. Several families spoke of their children having come close to emotional breakdown prior to being removed from school, including self-harming and suicide attempts. Often this was cited as due to bullying and/or linked to a child having Special Educational Needs (SEN). One family had come to home education because of their daughter's health needs; for them, home education was a means to provide what they felt was education appropriate to their daughter's current capacity, whilst escaping pressure from the school and the Local Authority.

Home education therefore provided an escape route for these families from what had become for them untenable situations. Many used the term 'last resort' and talked about the length of time it had taken them to come to the decision to home educate, with numerous attempts to make school 'work'. In several situations the children had struggled all the way through primary school (ages 5-11) in the hope that secondary school would be an improvement, with the decision to remove them being taken in the last year of primary school or the first year of secondary school.

Home education was initially seen as a period for recovery. Often the initial intention had been to withdraw a child from school for a short period of time with a view to reintegrating them into mainstream school having overcome the problems that had led to withdrawal. However, return to mainstream education seemed rare before the child reached 16. One mother

had tried returning her daughter to school unsuccessfully, removing her again when she had started to self-harm, another family had recently put one son into a small private school after family health issues had made continuing the home education of all three children impossible, at the time of interview this was successful. Hilary and Beth's description of the gradually receding idea of a return to school was typical; Beth had been taken out of school during the final term of primary school due to bullying and had been educated at home for 3 years:

Hilary: Initially we kept your place, 'cos she did have a place already booked at the secondary school, so initially we kept that and thought perhaps, that if she had the break, then she could start afresh. Although a lot of the same children were going to that school. But it was clear that she wasn't going to be ready to go back to school, so ...

RM: So you started home education and that was it really?

...

Hilary: We kept our minds open, in fact we've still got our minds open, but the likelihood of her going back now is pretty slim I think.

Rather than perceiving the school system in its entirety as problematic, 'last resort' families tended to describe their negative experiences of school in terms of their individual child and the attitudes of the individual school. Lydia was disparaging about the way her son's primary school had handled his recurrent bullying:

The primary school were no good, the primary school couldn't give a toss really, they sort of did what they had to do but there was none of this. It would start and then it would start again and they would start back at the beginning of the policy even though it was the same kids involved instead of like "we got to there we're gonna start there again and then move on further because you haven't got the hint".

For five of the families interviewed and several other families I encountered, only one child had initially been removed from school, with two families later removing their other child when they also experienced bullying. This demonstrates the way in which, for 'last resort' families, home education is about an individual child's experiences. There were frequent comments about the perceived negative attitudes of schools and individual teachers towards catering for children's individual needs, with help being refused or a lack of interest shown. Anna described the frustration she had encountered when she had tried to get help for her daughter Sandy, who was suicidal, to stay in school:

At the time she had a play therapist and the play therapist and I arranged to go in to see the EWO [Education Welfare Officer] and the headmistress. Headmistress didn't turn up, so it was just the three of us there and I'd written an A5, A4, sheet of all the different things that I thought could help Sandy. And we got to the bottom and they couldn't do any of them and the last thing on the bottom of the sheet was well I could home educate her then. And the woman turned round to me and said to me "well if you're not interested in your daughter's education then that's an option isn't it" and I thought I've just sat here

for an hour and I obviously am interested in her education otherwise I wouldn't put that at the bottom would I? So I took her out.

All the parents in this grouping described their children as different in some way. Because of past traumas they had experienced or their learning difficulties, they saw their children as individuals with individual problems and therefore in need of individual solutions. They saw the failure of their children's individual schools and teachers to find a solution as problematic rather than the inherent structure of the education system. This view was reinforced for Lydia and Anna by their experiences of helpful actions by previous schools.

For 'last resort' families home education was just that, a final option when all else had failed and they needed to protect their vulnerable children:

I did it because I felt I had no choice. I did it because the system she was in wasn't working, I didn't do it, I would have rather that system had worked to be honest but it didn't. So I guess, yeah – then you put your Lioness head on and gather in and try and protect don't you? (Anna, Interview)

Anna's metaphor of a lioness expresses powerfully the sense that at a certain point children cannot be left as vulnerable beings to cope on their own. It is also noticeable that in all the 'last resort' families it was the mother who had made the decision to protect her child by taking (or advocating for) the decision to home educate.

Conclusions

As has already been stated, common perceptions place home educators at extreme ends of what is in fact a broad spectrum. This study found that there were three main categories of home educators in terms of the choice to home educate: 1) Those who saw home education as a 'natural' choice compared to the false and restrictive structures of the formal education system; 2) those for whom home education was a 'social' choice tied in with their wish to transmit certain moral and social values and behaviours to their children; 3) parents for whom home education had been a last resort, and was perceived as a non-choice.

Although there were significant differences between these groupings there were also significant similarities. The key similarity is the theme of the individual. All of the families perceived their children as individuals and the parent (usually the mother) as the expert on those individual children. All families had found some fault, be it structural, social or at an individual level, with the school system, in particular the state-maintained education system and their solution had been to choose home education for their individual child. Although almost all parents conceded that there might be children and/or families for whom home education would not be appropriate, there was a lack of interest in solutions that went beyond their individual child or children.

This individualisation of choice expressed in home education is in many ways an echo of a wider mantra of 'choice' and 'the individual' within society and within social policy. Changing conceptions of childhood and children as well as of individual rights are reflected in educational policy with the rise of parental choice in education and also government schemes to individualise education to meet each child's needs. Home education is in many ways a logical extension of the educational choice mechanism. It also raises many of the same issues as private schooling: questions of elitism, social engineering and also of the exit of articulate and socially powerful parents from the state education system where their voices and choices might be used to go beyond improving the individual educational circumstances and experiences of their children and to have a wider social impact. The choice of home education also perhaps serves to highlight some of the different ways in which parents are dissatisfied with the school system and also continuing mismatches between schools and wider social cultures. It also highlights the broad spectrum of parents' concerns and constructions beyond a simplistic human rights/fundamentalist dichotomy. In this context researchers need to be thinking more widely about home education and its broader social impact.



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