

Part 3

School Education: Policies, Innovations, Practices & Entrepreneurship

Gillian L. S. Hilton

Elective Home Schooling in England: A Policy in Need of Reform?

Abstract

This paper examines the recent noticeable rise in parents and carers in England, deciding to home school their children. This rise has been attributed to schools advising parents with 'difficult' children, those with special educational needs or behavioural problems, that they have a choice; home educate or their child will be permanently excluded. Also, there is a rise in parents removing children from schools due to bullying, school refusal and general unhappiness with school regimes and demands made on learners. The paper discusses causes of this increase in elective home schooling and examines the policy changes proposed and implemented by successive governments. Recently, concerns have arisen over what type of education is being offered to children by poorly educated parents, the rise of so called temporary schools in unsuitable buildings, concerns over religious indoctrination and the lack of a broad and balanced curriculum being offered, which could result in a lack of future employment opportunities for students. Certainly, a new approach is urgently needed if children's futures are to be protected.

Keywords: home schooling, England, policy on home education

Introduction

Williams (2018), claims that the current move to home educate children arose in the 1970s, when it was judged as unusual or anti-establishment, but has now become the fastest growing type of education provision. Guidance for elective home education (EHE) was first given by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2007. The guidance applies to England alone and has been recently updated in 2019, due to growing concerns about the number of children in 'home education' as this has increased rapidly of late. The government is concerned that schools may be encouraging parents/carers of children who have special needs and/or have behavioural problems to home educate, or face permanent exclusion of the student from school. In addition, worries have arisen over the appearance of unregulated schools, springing up in unsafe buildings and tending to be run by and attended by, those of the Muslim faith. Grave concerns have arisen about the radicalisation of children, the use of untrained teachers in unsuitable conditions, a restricted

curriculum and discrimination against girls. These concerns echo what became known as the ‘Trojan Horse Crisis’ in Birmingham schools in the early teens of this century (Clarke, 2014). This was an accusation that some schools in areas of Birmingham, were following a restricted curriculum, demonstrating discriminatory attitudes towards staff and a lack of equal treatment for the different genders. In addition, the National Curriculum was not being followed and children introduced to values that were not considered as ‘British’ in origin or outlook.

In a *Dispatches* Documentary for Channel 4 TV (Channel 4, 2019), the Children’s Commissioner, who herself took part, raised concerns about the quality of home education being provided. She claimed that, though there were cases of excellent home schooling with a broad curriculum being provided by parents, there were also instances where parents, who themselves had learning difficulties such as dyslexia, were being encouraged by schools to teach their children at home. This was happening particularly, if their children were liable not to achieve desired passes at GCSE examinations. In the programme, LAs were asked if they had enough powers or resources to supervise the education of these children. All those who responded, said those powers were insufficient and they lacked accurate knowledge of numbers of home schooled children in their areas.

The Local Government Association (LGA), which represents councils in England and Wales, has repeatedly called for a compulsory register of home schooled children and is demanding the right to enter homes to see if these children are receiving an adequate education (LGA, 2019). The LGA points to the fact that some children are actually being taught under the home schooling name, in illegal, unsafe schools (often old office buildings), which are known to the authorities, but continue to practice despite receiving closure orders. This was underlined in the Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme, where such a school was visited and entry was refused; ‘teachers’ claiming that it was not a school. It is a criminal offence to run an unregulated school, that is, one not registered with the DfE where no Ofsted or LA inspections occur. These illegal schools often only teach for a limited number of hours each week and therefore claim to be ‘home schooling’. O’Sullivan (2015) noted in a blog that the DfE at that time had expressed concerns that some of these schools are not teaching ‘British Values’ as required in law and that a fear of radicalisation was causing concern. It appears there are only limited ways by which the existence of these schools can be challenged, LAs only redress is to use health and/or fire regulations, but this needs the right of entry, which is generally refused.

The Children’s Commissioner asserted in her report (Children’s Commissioner, 2019), that the increase in schools ‘off-rolling’ or informal exclusion of children, whose behaviour, attendance or academic achievement was likely to cause schools trouble with Ofsted inspections, had got out of control. Adams (2019) pointed out, in one of many press reports, that the Commissioner had called for greater supervision of such children’s education, as home schooling had doubled in the last five years (Children’s Commissioner, 2019). Her report asserted that the exponential increase of home schooling, raised the need for Local Authorities (LAs) to have the right to demand that home schooled children are placed on a compulsory register. This would allow note to be made of the curriculum they are being taught and their safety assured. The report claimed there had been a 48% rise in home schooling between 2015-16 and 2017-18, but as registration was not demanded, the numbers could be

much higher. 'Estimates suggest that in 2018 there may have been around 53,000-58,000 home educated children in England' (Foster & Danechi, 2019, p. 15).

Numbers of home schooled children have it is thought, doubled since 2013. Figures are incomplete, as parents do not have to register their child for home schooling, causing safeguarding concerns (NSPCC, 2014; Adams, 2019). In 2018 the DfE launched a consultation on EHE, asking for opinions whether the regulations re home schooling and the curriculum taught, should be reviewed (DfE, 2018; Lepper, 2018). This resulted from a call by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), raising concerns over the growth in numbers. In its reasons for the consultation, the government admitted that little had changed since the Education Act of 1944, in response to home schooling and that it was time to re-examine their approach. LAs were asked to provide evidence on whether registration of home schooled children should be compulsory; how home schooling could be monitored; what support is/could be offered to families. Two draft documents to advise parents/carers and LAs about their rights and duties to home schooled children, were included; on which LAs were asked to express their opinion.

As a result of these growing anxieties, there was a call in April 2019, by the Secretary of State for Education Damian Hinds, for the compulsory registration of all children whose parents elected to educate them at home (DfE, 2019a; Weale, 2019a). This move however, was strongly resisted by parents. Therefore, the government, in an attempt to appease them, promised more support and the provision of teaching materials. However, much is already available online, provided by private companies profiting from the rise in home schooled numbers. Further concerns rose from a 2019 review of EHE, showing that at least eighteen per cent of home educated children were known to social services, for other reasons than home schooling (ADCS, 2019). The ADCS survey also showed that the majority of home educated children were in the secondary stage of schooling, which raises concerns about their ability to take national examinations and move into employment.

Government guidance

In 2019 after the concerns of the Children's Commissioner, and the consultation in 2018, an update to the 2007 LAs and Parents' Guidance Documents was issued. However, these still do not allow inspection by LAs of the quality of education offered to home schooled children, which many in the system think is a mistake (Issimdar, 2018). These documents set out the legal requirements for those involved, but there is no stipulation of a curriculum, whereas schools are expected to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, with secondary level children being prepared for national examinations as normal practice. The 2019 guidance document to LAs notes the following:

When local authorities engage with home-educating families they should take into account the context of individual situations. Often home education will be undertaken as a positive choice which is expected to lead to a better outcome. However, in some cases home education may be attempted as a last resort. This appears to be occurring more frequently, and is likely to have implications for the quality of home education provided. Such families may require more support and guidance. (DfE, 2019b, p. 7)

However, this new set of regulations and guidance suggestions are non-statutory, that is they are guidance only and the documents for parents and for LAs were not well received by the LGA. In them, though a register for home school children is proposed, this does not in the eyes of the association go far enough to ensure that the safeguarding duties of LAs are supported. For example, there is no right to enter homes unless there are safeguarding issues brought to light via other agencies. Merely claiming to home school a child is not sufficient to allow LAs the right to check if the child is being correctly treated and cared for (Weale, 2019b). Safeguarding issues have been brought to light after deaths at the hands of their parents of a small number of children, either by neglect or assault. For example, a child who died in Wales as a result of scurvy, due to extremely poor nutrition provided by his parents (Forrester et al., 2017). ‘The overriding objective in these cases is to ensure that the child’s development is protected from significant harm’ (DfE, 2019b, p. 4).

The guidance gives LAs the opportunity if evidence is brought to light, that suitable education is not occurring, to serve a School Attendance Order (SAO) on the parents. If this is not obeyed, then an Education Supervision Order (ESO), or prosecution of the parents can occur. If the ESO is not complied with, a Care Order can be issued, by which the child/children can be moved into the care of the LA. Lack of adherence to prosecution can also lead to an ESO etc. being applied. However, as LAs point out, how do they gain evidence if they are not allowed to insist on entry to homes? According to the ADCS (2019, p. 1) ‘A combined total of 1,400 School Attendance Orders (SAOs) were issued across 61 LAs relating to the suitability of home education’. Foster and Danechi (2019, p. 15) commenting in their House of Commons briefing paper on an unfinished version of the ADCS report noted that ‘This represents an increase of 171% from 2018’.

Why do parents choose to home educate?

The reasons for parents deciding to full or part-time educate their children are varied and include the off-rolled children mentioned above. However, many parents choose it for other reasons, often ideological ones. For example, that expecting children to sit at desks all day and follow a set routine is wrong (Williams, 2018). Financially it can be difficult, as the costs of education have to be borne by the family and often EHE means one parent cannot work. Other reasons such as the need for education to be child-led, rather than teacher-led is given, but also many parents say they have to take this route as their child has suffered from bullying or assault, verbal, physical or by social media. The National Association of Head Teacher’s Report on the accountability stresses on schools, calls for a rethink of the pressures put on schools and therefore children and teachers, by the high targets set by the DfE (NAHT, 2018). These certainly contribute to the dislike of school suffered by some children, as they feel under constant pressure to succeed.

Criticisms of home schooling

One of the fiercest critics of home schoolers is Apple (2000), who compared their philosophy to that of gated communities in the USA, locked away from communities unlike theirs and living in an artificial bubble removed from real life.

Schools he adheres, though not perfect do provide a community, a sense of belonging in our divided, so called multi-cultural societies.

In 2019 the House of Commons reacting to the concern of LAs and the Children's Commissioner produced a report *Home Education in England* (Foster & Danechi, 2019) which, like other reports, showed that the outcomes of home educated children are generally poor in comparison with those who receive full-time schooling. Yet, still LAs have no right of access to the homes of these children. The DfE collects no data on the outcomes for EHE, but in 2009 the Children Schools and Families Committee of the House of Commons found from an enquiry, that at the time twenty two percent of 16-18-year old's who had been home educated, were not in work or full-time education. In comparison the national average is 5 per cent (House of Commons, 2019).

There is a belief that children left to their own devices and natural curiosity will educate themselves; an idea supported by many of the home educating parents. These ideas are based on those of Holt (1991) who also wrote about home schooling and his theories about learning and why children fail. Autonomous learning, or unschooling, child-directed or self-directed learning as it is also called, does not need the 'teacher' to be knowledgeable in any specific area, but to learn with and alongside the child in areas in which he/she is interested. It acknowledges that some input is required, say on learning to read and doing higher maths problems, but that should happen through interest not compulsion. The autonomous education could be in a home setting, or in an educational establishment on which philosophy the famous 'Summerhill School' in England was based. There children do not have to attend any learning activities whatsoever and make up their own rules as a collective. The author, on visiting the school was somewhat astonished to discover a multitude of rules invented by the children, to be followed by teachers and students. These rules where it appears, constantly discussed and added to by the children and were, when the author visited, in the hundreds. To this author's mind it rather negated the do-it-yourself 'free' philosophy adopted by the policy's adherents. Apple's views are echoed by Webb (2011) who believes that giving children choices often results it little actual education occurring; rather, late sleeping, watching junk television programmes, eating 'rubbish' and a lack of self-discipline, as they do not learn it from slack parents. These problems were observed in the *Dispatches* programme mentioned above. Webb home educated his own daughter, but is fiercely critical of parents who do not encourage and insist on their children taking national examinations, so they can move forward in their education. He believes much of the so-called autonomous education is doing little service to children, as it is wrong to let children choose what it is important to learn and the type of lifestyle to adopt. They are not capable he believes, of making such judgements at such a young age.

Research

To explore further this topic, five in-depth interviews were carried out to ascertain the opinions of parents as to their reasons for EHE. These reasons were very varied, 2 parents had withdrawn their children due to problems with the school, either behavioural or learning difficulties, one who thought local schools were, 'rubbish' and all schools 'restrictive' and had never enrolled her children in a school

and 2 who had withdrawn their children because they were unhappy did not like school, or were bullied.

On the whole they appeared to be happy with their decision though, all agreed it affected their own lives and restricted their ability to work. All were female and two were single parents, living on benefit, never had holidays and could not afford extras such as sport or music tuition, or even many visits to 'educational' activities. Most made use of internet provision for learning, which gave them some relief from constant interaction. Three parents admitted it was sometimes difficult to get their children to work on material they did not enjoy and that the curriculum studied, though involving for example, free concert visits at a local church, or walks in the park and discussions of nature etc. were limited. One was teaching her children her own native language (she is not British) but others were making no attempt to introduce any foreign language experience, as they did not have the expertise and providing constant access to the internet cost money that was not always available. None of these parents had any training in teaching or curriculum design. Introducing material such as physics and chemistry was in most cases not possible because of the lack of opportunity to undertake practical work. There were some attempts at design and technology through cooking, some textile work and the use of construction materials. All of the children were of primary school age and when asked as to how the wider secondary curriculum could be handled, two parents said they would possibly pay for some input from tutors. However, the others said affording this was not possible, so they would have to use the net and manage on their own. The children appeared to be happy and secure and had siblings, but one said he missed his school friends and as an observer it does make one have concern over the social relationships of these children.

Conclusion

It does appear that the position of home schooled children in England is giving rise to concern as to what is being taught, by whom and if the children involved are having the best education possible. It appears that pressures on children to succeed, lack of provision or support for those with special educational needs and above all the pressure on parents to remove 'difficult' children from school rather than having them excluded, is of concern to LAs, to the Children's Commissioner, the ADCS and other groups. There are also worrying situations where parents, with little or no training and poor education themselves, are taking on the education of their own children, which does not bode well for future success. Also, that so many children appear to be withdrawn from school because they are unhappy, do not fit in, or suffer from bullying, should be given greater attention by all those involved in the education process. It is distressing to see that the constant pressures on children, teachers and schools to succeed, are having a detrimental effect on learning and on the happiness of some of our children. Lack of a wide curriculum, coupled with a non-attendance at national examinations is sure to have an adverse effect on the future attainment and employment of many of these children. It is essential that future governments allow more power for LAs to insist on registration of home schooled children with them and give them the duty to inspect what is actually happening to individuals and groups, withdrawn from the national education system.

The government has announced a further review of the guidance on home schooling, which will be undertaken at the beginning of this decade and the argument about the compulsory registration of home schooled children carries on.

References

- Adams, R. (2019): Call for more regulation of home-schooled children in England. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/feb/03/call-for-more-regulation-of-home-schooled-children-in-england> (Accessed 23.10.2019).
- ADCS (2019): *Elective Home Education Survey*. https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_Elective_Home_Education_Survey_Analysis_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 20.11.2019).
- Apple, M. (2000): *Away with All Teachers: The Cultural Politics of Home Schooling*. <https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/Apple.Away.pdf> (Accessed 23.10.2019).
- Clarke, P. (2014): *Report into allegations concerning Birmingham Schools as a result of the 'Trojan Horse' Letter*. London: House of Commons (HC 576), National Archives, Crown Copyright. www.gov.uk/government/publications (Accessed 26.10.2019).
- Channel 4 TV (2019): *Dispatches Skipping School; Britain's Invisible Children*.
- Children's Commissioner (2019): *Skipping School: Invisible Children, how children disappear from England's schools*. London: Children's Commissioner for England.
- DfE (2018): *Home Education: Call for Evidence and Revised DfE Guidance*. London: DfE.
- DfE (2019a): *New Register to help all children get the education they deserve*. London: Crown Copyright.
- DfE (2019b): *Elective Home Education: Departmental Guidance for Local Authorities*. London: Crown copyright.
- Forrester, D., Maxwell, N., Slater, T. & Doughty, J. (2017): *An Evidenced Review of the Risks to Young People and Children who are Educated at Home*. Wales, UK: Cascade.
- Foster, D. & Danechi, S. (2019): *Home Education in England*. Briefing Paper 5108, 24th July. London: HofC Library.
- Holt, J. (1991): *Learning all the time: How small children begin to read, write, count, and investigate the world, without being taught*. New York: Ticknall and Liss: Education Now Publishing Cooperative and Lighthouse books.
- Issimdar, M. (2018): Home schooling in the UK increases 40% over three years. BBC NEWS, 28th April.
- Lepper, J. (2018): DfE announces review of home schooling regulations. *Children and Young People Now*. <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/cyp/news/2005140/dfе-announces-review-of-home-schooling-regulations> (Accessed 20.10.2019).
- LGA (2019): Government urged to toughen up home education plans. London: LGA. <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/government-urged-toughen-home-education-plans> (Accessed 12.11.2019).
- NAHT (2018): *Improving School Accountability*. Report of the NATHE Accountability Commission. West Sussex: NATHE.
- NSPCC (2014): *Home Education: Learning from Case Reviews*. London: NSPCC Briefing.
- O'Sullivan, A. (2015): Unregulated schools. Blog for ADCS.
- Weale, S. (2019a): Council register of home-schooled children proposed. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/apr/02/home-educated-children-to-be-registered-under-proposals> (Accessed 05.11.2019).

- Weale, S. (2019b): Government proposals ‘fall short’ on helping home-schooled children. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/17/government-proposals-home-schooled-children> (Accessed 25.102019).
- Webb, S. (2011): *Elective Home Education in the UK*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Williams, S. (2018): ‘Schooling is very oppressive’: Why home schooling is on the rise. *The Guardian*, 3rd November.

Dr. Gillian L. S. Hilton, Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom