Can We Classify Motives for Home Education?

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Home educators are often stereotyped by concerned professionals and others who make statements based upon their beliefs rather than research. Characteristics such as, eccentric, arrogant, ignorant, middle-class and hippy are often associated with home educators. Increasingly too, they are represented as a potential danger to their children, either emotionally or physically, to the extent that extra monitoring has been called for. This leads to the question of what type of people home educate? This paper explores the possibility of classifying home educators according to their motives, using categories defined by earlier research. The paper concludes that in the UK context, such classifications are simplistic and misleading. A different approach is proposed defining home educators instead by strata; first as a superficially homogenous group, secondly as diverse groups, thirdly as families and fourthly as individuals. This stratum approach gives insight into the increasing numbers of families who are choosing to home educate and their growing appearance as a movement. Whilst home educators may appear to be the beneficiaries of strength in diversity, their rising profile and snowballing numbers may also be the cause of them becoming increasingly 'problematised' by professionals and by government, with a consequent increase in restrictions and legislative control.

Keywords: homeschooling, child-centred, learning, lifestyle, parenting, children

Introduction

Section 7 of The Education Act 1996 (England and Wales) states that:

> The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable: (a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and (b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school *or otherwise*. (The Education Act, 1996, England and Wales)

In the UK there is little regulation of home educators. For example, home educators do not have to register, neither do they have to follow the national curriculum. There is no compulsion on local education authorities to monitor them, though there is provision in the law for them to do so. This situation and the growing awareness of it, is leading to what Monk (2004) describes as the 'problematising' of home education. That is to say, whilst there is not necessarily a problem with home education itself, growing concerns from interested professionals are beginning to turn it into a problem. He writes, 'parents who choose to home educate are pathologised; perceived at best as somewhat eccentric or odd and at worst viewed with a degree of suspicion and unease' (Monk, 2004: 27).

A good example of the way in which a lack of information about home education brings mistrust and exaggeration came in July 2004 when home educators became the focus of a motion passed by the Professional Association of Teachers at their annual conference: 'Conference believes that the Government should consider upgrading procedures for monitoring children educated at home by parental preference as a matter of urgency' (Tomsett, 2004). The motion was passed with overwhelming support from the teacher members and attracted immediate press attention from the BBC news (29th July), *Guardian* newspaper, *The Times*, Epolitix.com (all July 30th), Woman's Hour (30th July, personal communication) and a little later, from Radio 4's 'You and Yours' (2nd September). In her speech, Tomsett reported that some home-educated children, 'ended up as under-age workers in their family businesses or other jobs'. Referring to children who were being home educated after having been bullied at school, she told the conference that their houses became, 'a magnet for friends truanting from school, with the result that none of them got an education', basing this on the rationale that 'If the mother isn't powerful enough to get the child to school, she certainly isn't powerful enough to make him get up and do five hours study and shoo away his friends.'

Despite these comments, no systematic research evidence has been traced that supports the view presented to the conference. Inevitably such hearsay evidence can lead to misunderstandings about the type of people who home educate. Hastings (1998) reported Fred Forrester of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), describing home educators thus, 'Taking children out is a cop-out and usually done by hippie types of parents who are a little eccentric', whilst Towers (2002), a councillor in Aberdeenshire, has been quoted as saying of parents' reasons for home educating that, 'Often they stem from a mixture of arrogance and ignorance. Some parents seem to think that they can make a better job of it.'

Adding to the debate, the DfES (2003) wrote the following about home educators in Rothermel's (2002) research: 'About half the mothers of the children had degrees – this is hardly a representative sample. You would expect this group to have excellent attainment results – educated mothers with parental interest in education.' The point made by the DfES was in fact misleading and incomplete. Whilst 49% of the mothers who described their education in this research had degrees, the really surprising information was that about 51% of mothers did not have degrees and 27% actually had no post-school education at all and yet their children were attaining higher levels than their school counterparts who were taught by trained teachers. Contrary to what the DfES reported, this group would most definitely *not* be expected to have 'excellent attainment results'. More importantly, home-educated children aged 4–7 of working-class parents actually made better educational progress than middle-class home-educated children (Rothermel, 2004a, 2004b). Current research (e.g. Hanna & Quinn, 2004; Sylva *et al*., 2003) finds that both parental level of education and socioeconomic status (SES) are two of the main indicators of pupil achievement and yet, in the home-education research, neither of these factors played such a central role in attainment. Thus, it seems that SES and parental qualifications are indicators of success only for school

children and the importance of their role in children's learning *per se* should not be assumed.

Equally ill informed was the Association for Education Welfare Management whose representative wrote to the Minister for Children, Margaret Hodge that her association welcomed recognition in the Children's Green Paper (TSO, 2003), 'of home education as a situation where children may be at risk' (Eason, 2004), a statement she later retracted in an undated letter to the DfES (AEWM, 2004).

What these comments indicate is that people in positions of considerable responsibility choose to portray home educators publicly as, alternatively or in combination, eccentric, arrogant, ignorant, well educated hippies who may represent a danger to their children, either emotionally or physically.

This paper draws on systematic research to develop a framework that can describe the motives of home educators in the UK. In this respect earlier research relating the classification of home educators is reviewed. This is followed by more recent research on the topic by the author.

'Taxonomies' of Home Education

Blacker (1981) conducted one of the earliest studies of home education in the UK. She interviewed 16 home-educating families to ascertain whether Dick Kitto's (the founder member of the home-education organisation 'Education Otherwise') categorisation of home educators into either of three groups, 'competitors', 'rebels' or 'compensators', would be supported. Kitto had proposed that 'competitors' were competing with the system, 'rebels' rebelling against it and 'compensators' trying to make amends after a problem in school. As a result of the interviews, Blacker concluded that home educators could indeed be classified into these three categories. 'Competitors' were formally qualified, well read parents, who were competing with school to give their children a better education. Often, such parents had made the decision to home educate before the birth of the children, believing that learning begins at birth. Their child-centred curriculum was balanced and private tutors incorporated as necessary, together with participation in events attended by other similar minded families. 'Compensators' agreed with the philosophy of school but had taken one of their children out of school for a specific reason and were attempting to make up for the school's failure with their child. Seven of the ten 'compensators' in Blacker's study intended returning their children to school and each of these families considered that their situation was unique. 'Rebels' were those parents who had chosen an 'alternative' lifestyle, they were concerned for their individual freedom and rejected social institutions. Rebels believed education should be autonomous and that a parent's role in education was to facilitate learning: such notions were a source of friction with the local education authority.

Blacker classified five of her 16 families as 'competitors', 10 as 'compensators' and one family as 'rebels'. Despite a sample size that prevented in-depth exploration of families within these categories, Blacker's research revealed an unusual insight into home educators' motives during the 1980s. However, contrasted with later studies, (i.e. Knowles, 1991; Knowles & Muchmore, 1995;

Lowden, 1993; Webb, 1990), Blacker's categories appear, *prima facie*, to be over simplistic. This is either because, as a result of the growth in home education witnessed over the last 20 years, home educators' motives have become more complex, or because with the advent of the internet, more recent researchers have simply had far wider access to larger and more diverse cross-sections of home educators than was the case over 20 years ago.

Mayberry (1989), discussing the analysis of her 1988 study involving 461 home-educating families from Oregon, USA, described four categories of home educator: 'religious', 'academically motivated', 'social–relational', and 'New Age'. Her categories can be described as follows: 'religious' are parents motivated by their religious values; 'academically motivated' parents believe they can do better than school; 'social–relational' parents believe their children are better off at home, socially and developmentally; and 'New-Age' parents are following an alternative lifestyle. Like 'religious' parents, 'New-Age' parents are committed to preserving their way of life.

Van Galen (1991) explored ways in which home educators in the USA might be classified. She divided North American homeschoolers into two groups, 'ideologues' and 'pedagogues'. 'Ideologues' object to what is taught in schools and seek to strengthen intrafamily relationships: they hold traditional, conservative and specific values, following a philosophy of Christian fundamentalism. The reasons that 'Ideologues' turn to home education may be as a quest for an alternative to school, for health reasons, academic difficulties or because they disagree with the curriculum taught in school. These reasons then shift, however, as they meet with other home-educating families. They become more radical as they network and absorb a shared philosophy, coming to believe they are following God's will by accepting an imposed responsibility for their children. 'Pedagogues' have educational reasons for homeschooling: school teaching is viewed as inept and the parents want to foster a broader interest in learning. 'Pedagogues' hold teaching skills and read up on education and child developmental issues: they tend to see home educating as symbolic of independence and as a way to avoid the inefficient, nonprofessional bureaucracy of society. Although their reasons for home educating may be similar to the 'ideologues', some 'pedagogues' may never have experienced difficulties with institutionalised schooling, believing that children learn in unique and natural ways, and that they are 'claiming' responsibility for their children as opposed to the 'ideologues' idea of 'accepting' it. 'Pedagogues' publicly proclaim their competence at educating their children without interference from institutions. They tend to be well read professional parents who are questioning the learning associated with schools. These parents often decide to home educate from very early on and adopt child-centred approaches. They are taking control of their children's education.

'Ideologues' follow structured learning routines whereas 'pedagogues' follow a child-led curriculum, using household resources in self-directed, individual learning. 'Pedagogues' take a light-hearted view of opposition to their decision to home educate and feel less need for support groups. The opposite is true of 'Ideologues'. Van Galen's 'pedagogues' and 'ideologues' equate loosely with Blacker's 'competitors' and 'compensators', albeit without

the religious connotations, and therefore, lend support to her theory of home-educator 'types'. Conceivably 'rebel' home educators do not exist in the USA, but it is more likely there were no such families in Van Galen's sample.

Following in the footsteps of Van Galen, Lowden (1993) attempted to categorise the 22 UK home-educating families that he interviewed. He also arrived at a two-category system and described, using the same labels, categories that were broadly similar to those of Van Galen, although he rejected the Christian element on the basis that this did not apply to the UK with such strong emphasis. In respect of Kitto's three classifications, Lowden recognised their existence but considered families to be transient, moving between those categories.

More recently, based on work in the USA, Stevens (2001) has repeated the 'pedagogue' and 'ideologue' division but renamed them, perhaps more appropriately, 'earth based' and 'heaven based'. For Stevens, 'earth based' are 'those who are comfortable participating in organisations that actively seek diversity and those who are uncomfortable in expressly Christian organisations', (Stevens, 2001: 136) whilst 'heaven based' believe that 'home education is put together hierarchically' (p. 128) with God at the top and children at the bottom (p. 113).

Finally, Apostoleris (2002), in discussing the ideologue/pedagogue distinction, comments that despite the blurred line between the two, they form a useful tool to distinguish between those who are dissatisfied with 'content' and those who are dissatisfied with 'method' (Apostoleris, 2002: 16).

The works of Blacker (1981), Lowden (1993), Mayberry (1989), Stevens (2001) and Van Galen (1991) appear to provide general support for a taxonomy of home education, but should nevertheless be treated with caution. It seems probable that home education has become more widespread in the last 10 years, at least in North America (Stevens, 2004) and the UK (Gabb, 2004). It is possible that since these categories were last proposed, more 'types' may have emerged than have previously been recognised. Or, as Van Galen (1981) implies, parents' motivations may change *after* they have started to home educate. Perhaps there is now, in the UK, too diverse a population pursuing home education to be neatly categorised.

Research Questions

Home education seems to be attracting more professional and media attention than in the past, at least in the UK. Previous attempts to identify groups, or taxonomies, of home education have generally been based on small, or overseas samples and may either no longer be valid or just not valid in the UK context. The following research questions arise from the review:

(1) Are the motives for home education proposed in the 1980s and 1990s still valid in the early 21st century?
(2) Might a sample with a broad UK database reveal different motives for home education?
(3) How can changes in motives for home education within one family be accommodated?

Sample and Methodology

The work reported here is based on preliminary analysis of questionnaires received from 419 home-education families in the UK ($n = 1099$ children). The questionnaires analysed were selected from a total of 1000 questionnaire returns following dissemination of approximately 5000 questionnaires. Home-educating families were reached through support networks, LEAs and internet discussion lists. The methodology also involved interviews with home-education families ($n = 100$), educational assessments of children ($n = 102$) and psychological assessments of children ($n = 136$). Further details about the sample and methodology are presented elsewhere (Rothermel, 2002).

Results

Sample characteristics

Of 409 participants who referred to their living arrangements, over three-quarters (89.73%) mentioned having an opposite sex partner, whilst 2.2% mentioned having a partner of the same gender: single parents accounted for 7.82% of the sample. Speaking of occupation, 394 parents described jobs that indicated wide variety within the sample. The largest groups were school teachers and lecturers (13.45%) and those working in the arts (11.68%). Health featured notably, with 4.07% working as nurses and doctors etc. Parents working in manual jobs made up 10.16% of the sample, describing jobs such as machinists, factory workers, labourers and lorry drivers. From 570 parents, half of the parents (51%) had been dissatisfied with their schooling in contrast with 36% who found it 'ok' and 13% who 'enjoyed' it. Whilst 59% of 548 parents had attended comprehensive schools, a further 41% were educated in either grammar or independent schools. Only one parent in the sample had been home educated. As Figure 1A shows, 49% of mothers and 67% of fathers had attended university. From this sample of 492, 26% of parents had no post-school education. Of the mothers (usually the main educators) in the sample, 27% did not have any post-school education, whilst 26% of fathers were in this position. It is likely that the figures underestimate the number of parents with no education beyond school, as these parents may have been disproportionately reluctant to answer this question. Overall, from the 419 families in the study, at least 40.81% of families contained one trained teacher.

Sample motivations

In an attempt to describe motivations, the questionnaire used in the present study asked about motivations but also included a separate question about the meaning home education had for the families. Parent responders could give as many motivations and meanings as they liked. Figure 1B gives the meanings described, each one given as a percentage of the whole sample.

'Freedom', 'flexibility' and 'we do what we want when we want' were the most often cited 'meanings' for 35.9% of the sample whilst the second most popular notion, proposed by 29.74% of families, was that the 'child can learn in his or her own style and can develop naturally'; 25.13% said that they valued the 'close relationship' and 'time together'. At the opposite end of
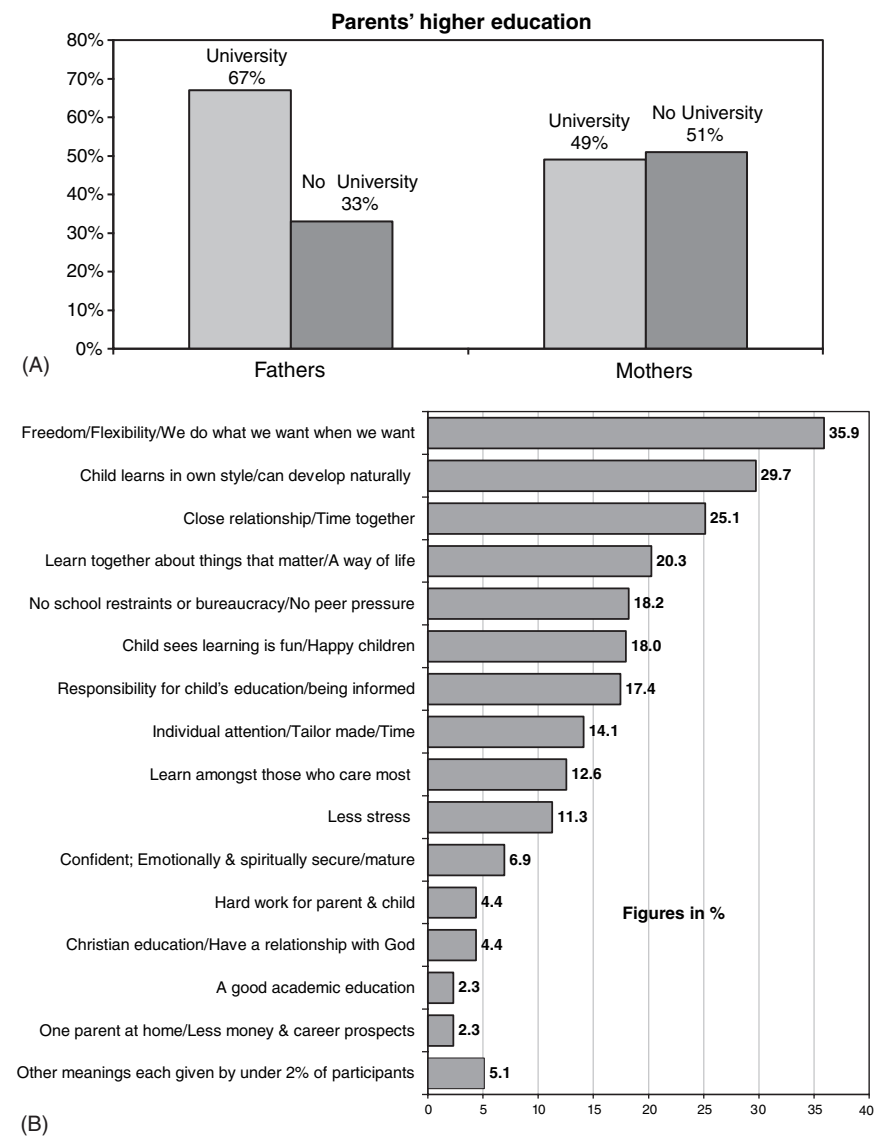
Parents' higher education

(A)

(B)

Figure 1 (A) Parents' higher education $n = 492$. (B) Parents' descriptions of what home education meant to them ($n = 390$). Participants could give more than one answer

the spectrum, a minority of parents cited more negative issues, saying that it meant 'hard work for parent and child' (4.36%), 'one parent at home, less money and career prospects' (2.3%), 'isolation' (1.79%) and 'pressure' (0.77%).

Answering the question 'What motivated you to home educate?', a third of the parents (30.77%), as shown in Figure 2, reported that 'disappointment with education' and 'schools' had motivated them to home educate, whilst almost as many (29.17%) said they had 'always intended to'. Bullying accounted for
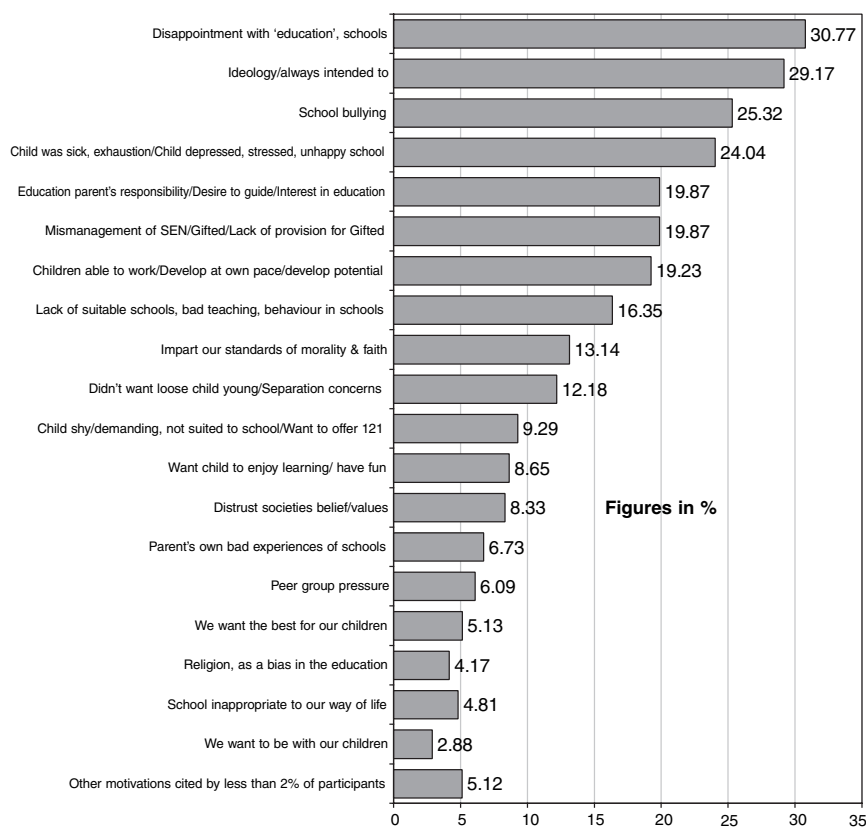
Figure 2 Parents' descriptions of what had motivated them to home educate (*n* = 412). Participants could give more than one answer

25.32% of the families' motivation, with 24.04% referring to their child's depression and stress caused by having been in school.

Overall, the motivations could be divided very approximately into two groups, those relating to experiences with school and those concerned with family ideology. Whatever type of motivation was reported, the words and phrases most frequently used to describe home education were 'freedom', 'ideology', 'individual', 'taking responsibility', 'way of life' and 'less stress/pressure'.

Existing taxonomies

The two groups of responses, those concerning experiences with school and those relating to family ideology, might have appeared to divide the group into two, but these were not exclusive categories, with many parents having multiple reasons, particularly where the motivation for home educating one child was not the same as the motivation for another. This happened where perhaps the first child was withdrawn from school and second and subsequent children were home educated because the family's philosophy had undergone significant change. Thus, no evidence was found for Van Galen's (1991) two categories. An early attempt was made to categorise the

home educators involved with the study into Blacker's three groups of competitors, compensators and rebels to see if these UK groupings could be used. However, this approach was discarded once it became apparent that family motivations were too diverse to be easily allocated and because of the very large extent to which they either straddled categories or were, as Lowden (1993) concluded, transient between classifications. Similarly, Mayberry's (1998) four categories did not work here as a useful tool for classification.

Interview data and field notes from interviews with home-educating families described the way in which families who initially were quite 'normal' became, over time as home educators, quite radical in their approach to life. Whilst they may have had an initial trigger for home educating, it led to a different way of living and thinking, much as described by Neuman (2004), in which home education became a lifestyle, rather than just an educational choice. There was certainly evidence of families with characteristics that would suit some of the above categories, but none that suggested any one authors' explicit classifications were robust enough to describe a taxonomy for all the UK home educators.

The notable absences from the research data were families with motivations that could easily be said to fit the characteristics of Van Galen's ideologues. The absence of ideologues as a group in the UK is probably because the Christian Right does not exert a significant impact in Britain, unlike its huge influence in the USA. Only 13.14% in this study spoke of morality and faith as a motivation and just 4.17% of families said that religion had motivated them.

Certainly many parents were religious – 27% of participants ($n = 419$) named a religion for themselves – but it was clear, given the above data on meanings and motivations, that religion for these families was not a major influence on their decision to home educate. Other evidence, taken from the questionnaire data in Figures 1 and 2, strongly suggests that it was not religion that led such families to home education; other influences, such as their backgrounds, their friends home educating, their children having problems at school and disagreement with the national curriculum, were often more influential. Thus, the questionnaire and interview data supported Spiegler's (2004) contention that religious home educators are not a homogenous group. Similarly, these parents had a strong commitment to a 'child-centred' approach to teaching (Rothermel, 2004 suggests that this is characteristic of all home educators, whether laissez-faire or structured in their teaching method), yet although this child-centeredness was certainly inconsistent with the structured approach of the national curriculum and the literacy and numeracy hours in English schools, labelling these families as either pedagogues or ideologues obscures the complexity of their motives. Some were religious, others were strongly influenced by friends and others were consciously seeking an alternative lifestyle.

Importantly, the experience of home educating led to changes, irrespective of the original motive. The parents' relationship with their children changed. In many cases home education brought families into contact with new friendship groups and new ideas, sometimes developing in them a sense of solidarity against the authorities. Above all, home education led to a change in lifestyle.

The Rothermel Classification/The Stratum Approach

Insofar as it was possible to classify home educators, the data suggested that they should, perhaps, be understood on four levels; first, as a superficially homogenous group; second, as a collection of diverse groups with home education in common; third, as families; and fourth, as individuals. The difference between this taxonomy and those previously noted is that this classification is by stratum rather than by type. Thus, the sections that follow are labelled as levels 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Level 1: A superficially homogenous group

Spiegler (2004: 8), writing of the situation in Germany, noted that, 'It has become clear, that the home-educating families in Germany are not a homogenous group'. This was also the view that emerged from the current study. Home educators share remarkably little in common beyond the fact that they home educate, although this could be a source of tension in itself (i.e. 'they don't home educate, they're gypsies'). Whilst some religious families home educated, they did not necessarily do so because of their religious beliefs any more than the New-Age families could be described as home educating because of their anarchistic or spiritual leanings. As Mayberry (1989) had inferred, these two groups had in common their desire to have control over their children's education. Moreover, families from these groups, and others too, were seemingly characterised by a commonality that had led them into home education rather than their denominational beliefs.

It might be said that what these people had in common was a concern for the environment, the community and a belief in their absolute responsibility in respect of their children. Religious and 'New-Age' families might perhaps have differed initially from those who turned to home education after trying school, but even here, many of the families who withdrew their children soon after starting school appear to have considered home education at an earlier time. Further, families withdrawing older children soon 'succumbed' to the influence of other home educators, gradually homogenising with them in respect of their new 'social conscience' that extended beyond their parenting role to concern about society and the planet generally. It appeared that home educators were people who took parental responsibility seriously and whose commitment to their children was largely indisputable. Evidence from school children confirms that such commitment is beneficial: a meta-analysis of 14 studies by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003: 4) concluded that 'parental involvement in the form of "at-home good parenting" has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation'.

Stevens (2001: 197) eloquently described the dichotomy of home education that this study has also found. In terms of homogeny, he writes of home educators that, 'they share some powerful convictions about what children need.' But he then describes them as anything but homogenous:

> It was not their ways of life or religious beliefs that divided them in the end, but rather their different sensibilities about how to organize. [...] As with so many soured relations, the crucial points of disagreement long

went unnoticed, lurking just beyond the pale of explicit discussion, even under smiling displays of unity. But the differences were evident if one took the time to look for them, cared to see. (Stevens, 2001: 198)

Level 2: Group differences

Whether various factions would view themselves as having anything in common was a different matter, as a further characteristic of home-educating families was the antipathy they sometimes felt towards one another. At the level of group orientation, differences such as religion or secularism, formal or informal education, Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons, Muslims or Catholics, mattered very much indeed. It was at this point that groups splintered, as membership of these categories was not directly connected to the causes of home educating but rather came about as a result of families' need for a sense of 'community'; hence religious families who home educated might have found fellowship at 'open house' evenings and amongst other home educators in their own congregations, whilst families from more secular backgrounds often amalgamated at events such as Education Otherwise (EO) gatherings even though the relationships therein were sometimes frail.

Not everyone felt the need to belong to a group however. The family of a girl who had been in care were not members of any organisation or church: it might be said of them that their strength was not in numbers, but rather, in their fight against the way that, as they viewed it, those in authority had victimised them.

Other families, as the interviews revealed, may not have been members of a home-education organisation at all but they did, nevertheless, have other affiliations, local and national, i.e. Action Rights for Children (ARCH), Natural Nurturing Network (NNN), La Leche League, Green Gathering, Manchester and District Communication of What's On (MADCOW) and electronic email lists such as the Single Parent Home-education List, Scottish Home-Ed, HE-Special-UK, Home Educators and UK Muslim, UK-HOME-ED Listserv etc (there are too many to list all here).

Level 3: Interfamily differences

Within groups there also appeared to be considerable differences. The Thistle family (a pseudonym) were very different from many other Jehovah's Witnesses families: most Witness families were child orientated, whilst the Thistles were more doctrine driven. The Thistles were one of the few families who might be said to have home educated because of their religion, despite their children having spent considerable time in school before being with-drawn. The secular families likewise often had little in common with each other: families in which the teaching was formal conceived their educational responsibility very differently from those who opted for a more autonomous approach and whilst both sets may have sympathised with those secular families who experienced psychological and social problems, they probably shared little mutual ground. Within groups there were those who home educated from birth and those who withdrew children from school, those who

were in conventional families and those who were not, those with older children, those with younger children, those with one or more children in school and those with none. There was some suggestion that parents preferred their children to mix with those from similar family compositions; a secular family with married mother and father might prefer their children to have friends from other such families, religious or secular, at school even, rather than with children from a nontraditional family structure even though they were fellow home educators. Furthermore, there was evident, but not necessarily obvious, a kind of snobbery about who were the 'real' home educators: hence comments such as, 'They aren't really home educating. They use tutors' or 'Well we hardly have anything in common with travellers! They don't home educate!'.

Level 4: Intrafamily differences

From both questionnaires and interviews there was evidence of friction within families, both between immediate and extended family. Only one family included children who specifically had not wanted to be home educated. Many families spoke of periods where one or other family member had preferred the school option. Often it appeared that one or other of the children wanted, temporarily, to try school, but that this often passed. Conversations during home visits with post-16-year-old previously home-educated children, suggested that, when younger, they had sometimes felt the need to be with other same-aged children quite desperately, but overall were pleased that they had been home educated and glad that their parents had pursued home education with them. Webb (1999) and Knowles (1991) also reported similar satisfaction, whilst Ray (2003) found that 74% of the 812 previously home-educated participants with children of school age were home educating their own children, an indication, perhaps, of their approval of having been home educated themselves.

Differences between spouses were common although most often the sceptical parent was persuaded in some manner or other. There was evidence that many of the children withdrawn from school during the primary years had a parent who had earlier wanted to home educate but who felt pressured into the school convention. Later, a trigger such as bullying, gave that parent 'ammunition' with which to convince the sceptics in the family that home education was an appropriate alternative. Other unconvinced parents accepted home education just to keep the peace. There was the father who went along with his wife's decision although he would have preferred his children to have been at school: the conflict was repressed but nevertheless present. In the experience of this author, it is these latter families who tend to face problems if the parents later divorce. The unconvinced parent uses the 'opportunity' to ask the courts to make an order for the children to attend school (sometimes successful, sometimes not).

Further, the study revealed evidence of many problems with grandparents and parents' siblings, who criticised the family's decision to home educate. This disapproval could sometimes cause considerable upset for the home-educating families. Somewhat sadly, 32% of respondents said that not being 'accepted by others' was one of disadvantages of home education.

Strength in Diversity

Monk (2004: 29) wrote of home educators that they 'are enormously diverse and it is important not to characterize them as a monolithic group [...] it is this very diversity that makes the construction of an identity and the development of a community more striking'.

What is particularly interesting about the superficiality of the group concept is that home educators appear, by their very lack of a single coherent identity, to represent a movement. The fact that home educators are such a hetero- geneous group with little in common except home education paradoxically gives them a higher profile with both the media and with the authorities. This newfound status is taking them beyond the early 1980s' caricatures of them as hippies and religious fanatics, beyond the 1990s' petty differences and squabbles, to a position of empowerment, whereby their differences and diversity are becoming their strength. The idea of strength in diversity is not an unusual one (e.g. Home Office, 2004; learning, 2004; United Nations, 2001) and is perhaps, obvious. Where once home educators could be dismissed as weird, these days, as the study has shown, they come from very many different backgrounds. It would seem that once those singled out for comment come to resemble the ones seeking to single them out, then they have indeed become a diverse group and that, it follows, becomes their strength. Arguments seeking to dismiss them through caricature are no longer valid. Thus the opinions against them need to be more explicit, more founded in firm basis.

Conclusions

There seems little doubt that the movement has snowballed over the last 20 or 30 years. A synthesis of the data on numbers gives a clear picture of a movement that is growing fast (e.g. Bates, 1996; Blair, 2004; Budge, 1997; Gabb, 2004; Lowden, 1993; Meighan, 1997; Petrie, 1992; Rothermel, 2000; Welsh, 1997). Given the diversity of today's home educators, it would appear logical that this, combined with the growth in home education, has brought with it changes in the motives for home educating. However, without earlier similar sized UK samples for comparison, this assumption cannot be confirmed. It may simply be that the sample used here was larger than earlier ones and so classifications were more varied. The motives emerging from the US studies do not apply in the UK simply because of differences in the populations as a whole (for example, the strength of the Religious Right in the USA).

The advantage of the stratum approach to understanding home educators is that it moves us away from seeing home educators as *types* i.e. middle-class (DfES, 2003, email correspondence), hippies (Hastings, 1998), child abusers (AEWM, 2004; Tomsett, 2004) and overattached (Wragg, 1997). This method also leads to a shift in focus from the narrow taxonomies proposed earlier by Blacker (1981), Lowden (1993), Mayberry (1989) and Van Galen (1991). Further, it allows for changes in motives for home education within the family to be accommodated.

Level 1 is a superficially homogenous group but members have very little in common apart from home education and a desire for control over

their children. Level 2 reveals some quite deep differences between groups. However, these differences arise from a need to form support networks with other like-minded home-education families. Importantly, though, the basis for the support networks was not just families' commitment to a particular religious belief or set of educational values, but also to their change in lifestyle resulting from home education. At Level 3, substantial differences between families within each support network become apparent, affecting their approach to home teaching and the influence that parents exert on their children's choice of friends. Finally, Level 4 identifies tensions within the wider family systems of home-education families.

This alternative way of understanding the motivation of home-education families is implicitly critical of previous taxonomies as oversimplistic. The more complex and sophisticated picture proposed here is probably made possible by the larger sample and broader database. It is also possible that the picture has become more complex as home education itself becomes more popular. However, while that might result in an increase in categories of home educator, there is no obvious reason to expect that previous categories would cease to exist.

The wider implications of the approach proposed here still remain unclear, although it would seem perhaps, that the need to describe home educators in this way is indicative of an emerging movement. In the USA it is becoming possible to visualise home education as a market force (see Aurini & Davies, 2004; Stevens, 2004). That, however, has resulted from a substantial increase in the number of home educators as well as from the publicity created by particular groups. It remains to be seen whether the same will occur in the UK although the evidence is that this, albeit in the early stages, is beginning to be the case. Whilst the strength in diversity argument is plausible, it is also possible, however, that an increasingly high profile for UK home education will result in it becoming increasingly 'problematised' by professionals and by government, with a consequent increase in restrictions and legislative control. The jury is still out.

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