

# Helen Lees – Home education or schooling? A paradigm shift

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Home education is a theme that has not previously been covered in MiE. In the latest of our series of interviews with education professionals, **Chris Oates** talks to **Helen Lees** about her views on home education and how it differs from schooling. **Helen Lees** is a freelance academic, living in Florence, Italy, and an associate research fellow at York St John University, UK. She is founding Editor-in-Chief of *Other Education – the Journal of Educational Alternatives* and co-editor (with Professor Michael Reiss) of the book series *Palgrave Studies in Alternative Education*.

*Tell me a little about your early career and what led to your interest in home schooling.*

I studied philosophy at what can best be described as a ‘top university’ and for the first time, I became conscious of the class system and its hierarchy. The sifting and sorting that I hadn’t noticed at school became apparent, because I was sifted into a lower category of worth – I wasn’t rich, I hadn’t been to a public school and I was female. It was a sociological awakening.

These views were reinforced during my teacher training. I felt schools create hierarchical structures – the modelling for doing as you’re told and keeping in your place. Simultaneously, I discovered *Summerhill* by AS Neill (Neill, 1960), and to me it was a blueprint for how life should be organised right from the start. It led me in due course to value consideration of home education.

So for me, the journey to home education had nothing to do with education. It was to do with the idea that we can have another world, how that world is forming and how it can work.

*Reports indicate that home education is on the increase in the UK. What do you think are the main drivers behind this trend?*

The internet has introduced greater societal equality. I’m not saying social reality has particularly changed, but

instead how we feel about ourselves. Our sense of selfhood has been affected by access to knowledge and with that comes what happened to me – an awakening. Many more people want the possible world of home education now that they can see it being discussed online, rather than the one that schooling creates and which previously was the only concept to hand.

I’m not saying that home education is a utopia or that it’s the answer to everything. I think in many ways it has as many pluses and minuses as a good school education. The one thing that home education has that schooling does not have – and this makes it incredibly attractive and valuable – is that it has freedom. It’s true freedom because there are no limits: you can live the way you want, you can become educated the way you want, you can form a relationship with the world in the way that you want.

*Do you see any particular patterns in home schooling – for example: is it parents with children with special needs or with children who are being bullied?*

We don’t have secure numbers of those who do it due to the current system, meaning registering is not an obligation for those children who never attended school. The picture is mixed. Yes, of course there are the special needs families – often failed by schools or otherwise needing something schools cannot offer – and plenty of families who choose home education to escape bullying issues that schools aren’t dealing with adequately, but there are also the people who seek escape from a state system – refugees from the system. I am such a refugee myself, despite never having home-educated. It’s in the blood to seek this kind of escape for some. Home education research has come up with all kinds of labels: ideologues, pedagogues etc., but it’s an environment where you can escape labels – the labels from schooling, like stupid or failure or successful or best student. They’re all just labels and in home education you don’t really have to engage with that kind of thinking.

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*...and have the patterns changed since you first became interested in the topic?*

When I first started researching home education, many of the people that I surveyed thought that it was illegal. Ten years later I don't think I would get the same reaction if I asked the same questions: because of the internet, because of social media and more and more news stories about home educating. Even bad publicity can be good because it raises the simple awareness that home education is a legal option.

So home education is a changing scene where parents are becoming more aware and enabled to speak up about this legal option for their children's education. I think that now, when intractable problems in schools occur, parents know about home education as an exit option. The data that we have on flux shows that the children are going in and out of school. Flexi-schooling is a very interesting concept. If schools were able to implement flexi-schooling more fully, then it could create a very interesting and fruitful situation. Sometimes children need a break for all kinds of reasons, for example bullying or furthering the development of a particular talent. There needs to be more flexibility.

*There have been some very negative press reports on the quality of home schooling. Is a more accurate picture that the quality is variable?*

Between 2004-2009, when home education started to become quite a media issue in the UK, reports were mostly if not incredibly positive. Then, the Badman Review was announced, in my opinion in the most cynical and deliberately negative way (Great Britain, Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2009). I consider there is significant prejudice against home education. The framing and conduct (which subsequently was strongly criticised by the Education Select Committee) of the Badman Review highlighted this. Suddenly media reports were negative – an overnight change. One aspect of the Review's remit was to investigate whether home education could be used as a cover for child abuse, such as forced marriage and domestic servitude. There may have been cases where girls were taken out of school with the pretext of home educating them and sent abroad to marry at a young age, but that's not home education, is it? That's using home education as a cover. I think they tried to knock a few birds on the head with one very negative stone – misuse of home education as an option and the threat of its rise in popularity affecting the school system – and it worked. Ever since the Badman Review, the newspaper reports have most often been focused on home education as dangerous and likely to cause the imminent death of a child. This is a ludicrous portrayal of an educational pathway.

As far as I am concerned, home education is an education that is functioning. I'm not saying that it's an education that is always operating at the best level in the world, but as an educational pathway it is able to allow that child to function and take part in the society of their choice when they're an adult. That is home education. Anything else,

anything that harms the child or that doesn't allow them in the future to choose the society that they wish to be a part of is not home education – it's both child and also educational neglect.

*Have you followed up on any particular case studies on how home education is working in practice?*

As part of my PhD I looked at the serious case review of the Khyra Ishaq case (Carter, 2010). It was very clear that there was no home education going on. The serious case review stated that there had been an unprofessional lack of curiosity about the educational activity – the lack of curiosity on the part of those responsible for asking about the education supposed to be in progress led to that child's death. I've written about this and I've said it is impossible for parents to fake home education if they're asked about it (Lees, 2014), because it involves having a philosophy, having opinions and doing things in an adventurous way. Just ask the parent: What have you done? Where have you been? What groups are you into? It's impossible to fake that. Home education is very active. All the parents I spoke to and interviewed for my PhD who were practising home education were extremely positive about its effect on their children and on themselves. They were real home educators who were able to talk at length about what they did and why and they were very busy people. Home education is hard work.

*So do you think it's possible to monitor quality without excessive bureaucracy? Does it need some form of inspection?*

Yes I do, and this is the frustrating thing, and why I find home education very boring to study these days with a view to impact, because nobody in government is listening to research outcomes. I've said it is possible to monitor home education very easily: you just speak to the parents. I can't see why parents who have a responsibility in law to ensure an education is happening would hesitate to do that. The trouble is that the authorities think that they can dictate what the education looks like – often it's a vision of education which involves reading, writing and arithmetic and some sort of standardised test mechanisms. What is clear about home education is that it can't happen if there's no activity. So just ask what are the activities and what is being learnt from them in the widest possible sense? For the rest – in respect of the freedoms involved – it is not the state's business to monitor or control this. So the fundamental change would be that local authorities would have clear guidelines about what exactly they are looking for when they are having those conversations. They are looking for active education. What kind is not their remit, just commitment to an educational pathway of whatever kind. The parents should have thought about this and have a lot to say. Home education involves tremendous reflection on the part of the parents to be responsible to their obligations to not fail the child and to be responsive to the individuality of the child. Most parents are engaged in such reflection about their children and I have found that the kind of parent who

seeks to home-educate is particularly reflective about education.

*So do you think the government's proposed register of home schooling will have any positive benefits?*

Only if they don't specify what the education looks like. I'm not against a register. It just all comes down to what the authorities imagine home education is and their imagination is based on a current vision of schooling. That would be a problem if it didn't fall into line with what home education really is, which is a pathway of freedom.

*Are there any support structures out there for parents who choose to home-educate?*

I'm just about to publish a paper by a colleague for *Other Education* which is about technological networks as support structures (Fensham-Smith, 2019). The internet is the main support structure for home education, but that translates into physical meetings for local groups. There is one phrase from Germany, where home education is illegal; where they were worried it would cause 'parallel societies' (Spiegler, 2015). The concern there is that people who home-educate will establish a subculture or alternative way of living, but I don't see that as an issue as long as home-educating families can demonstrate that their children are taking part in activities where they can freely socialise.

*So do you think the government should be thinking about this more in depth now?*

Home education is positive, it offers great benefits to society because it means that people who struggle at school or for whom school is not working can find a healthy way forward. What needs to change is that the government needs to start listening to home education experts who actually understand its difference. So far the only people that they have listened to with a view to forming policy are people who are experts in schooling, and that doesn't work. My PhD was about the complete paradigm shift involved in home education as a way of life. Home educators are living that paradigm shift. But the authorities are not able to conceptualise that there is another way. To say this is an educational ignorance and mistake is frankly to underestimate the gravity of the harm such ignorance can do. I'd call it willful abuse and destruction of a viable educational pathway to not notice how home education is fundamentally different from schooling as pathway (Neuman and Aviram, 2003).

*Picking up on the global aspects of home education – is it growing globally?*

There's been a rise in governmental blocks on home education since I started researching it in 2006. Sweden

has come down on it very heavily – there have been refugees from Sweden to Finland because of home education and a Swedish child was unfortunately removed from his family because he was being home-educated (ROHUS Board, 2012). France, Spain and Italy all have restrictions (Home School Legal Defense Association, 2019). So there are different levels of ability to home-educate globally, in the sense of state freedoms. Currently, the UK is a liberal regime in this respect. This is one of the jewels in the crown of its educational 'system': the ability to not participate in the system.

*Thank you, Helen. You've raised some fascinating issues and I'm sure this is a debate which we'll be hearing more about in the future.*

### Author's note

*Other Education* – the *Journal of Educational Alternatives* can be accessed for free at: [www.othereducation.org](http://www.othereducation.org)

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