How to Desire Differently: Home Education as a Heterotopia

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This article explores the co-existence of, and relationship between, alternative education in the form of home education and mainstream schooling. Home education is conceptually subordinate to schooling, relying on schooling for its status as alternative, but also being tied to schooling through the dominant discourse that forms our understandings of education. Practitioners and other defenders frequently justify home education by running an implicit or explicit comparison with school; a comparison which expresses the desire to do 'better' than school whilst simultaneously encompassing the desire to do things differently. These twin aims, however, are not easy to reconcile, meaning that the challenge to schooling and the submission to norms and beliefs that underlie schooling are frequently inseparable. This article explores the trajectories of 'better than' and 'different from' school as representing ideas of utopia and heterotopia respectively. In particular I consider Foucault's notion of the heterotopia as a means of approaching the relationship between school and other forms of education. Whilst it will be argued that, according to Derrida's ideas of discursive deconstruction, alternative education has to be expressed through (and is therefore limited by) the dominant educational discourse, it will also be suggested that employing the idea of the heterotopia is a strategy which can help us explore the alternative in education.

INTRODUCTION TO HOME EDUCATION IN THE UK

Home education is the growing face of alternative education. Whilst reliable figures are not easy to gather, the description of home education as 'the fastest growing form of basic education today' (GHEC, 2012) seems to be justified. As an international phenomenon there is a spectrum of political and legal contexts and reactions to home education ranging from its complete outlawing in Germany and Sweden to minimal regulation in the UK (Nicholson, 2014). As a consequence of this lack of regulation

the extent of home education in the UK is unknown. A child withdrawn from school to be home educated will be known to the local authority and will be registered as such but there is no legal compulsion to register a home-educated child if that child has never attended school, nor is there a legal compulsion to inform the new local authority if a child not attending school moves residence from one local authority area to another (Nicholson, 2014). The lack of accurate figures makes the history of home education in the UK extremely difficult to track. Meighan (1997) sites the origin of the movement to a handful of families gathering in a Swindon farmhouse in the 1970s; a handful which has apparently grown to somewhere between 45,250 and 150,000 children (Hopwood *et al.*, 2007) and is still rising—perhaps by as much as 15 per cent per annum (M. Fortune-Wood, 2009). The course of this expansion, however, will now never be possible to chart.

Local authorities and the media periodically cite the lack of official knowledge surrounding home education as a real or potential problem (Sellgren, 2010). An additional source of tension is the relationship between home educators and local authorities who are authorised to identify children not receiving a suitable education but who have no remit to monitor home education. Home educators argue that local authorities frequently act without legal mandate whilst local authorities have complained that they are unable to discharge their duties over a fuzzy set of responsibilities. However, government consultations carried out in 2007 and 2008 concluded that no changes to the law were necessary (Nicholson, 2014). Then in 2009, following the death of Khyra Ishaq,[1] Ed Balls, then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, commissioned a review of elective home education in England. The review was conducted by Graham Badman, a former director of children's services for Kent County Council and was submitted in June 2009. The review made a number of recommendations concerning the regulation and control of home education (Badman, 2009a). Home educators and a handful of parliamentary supporters hotly contested the tone of the review which, they argued, conflated welfare and education issues in its suggestions that home-educated children were 'hidden' and at greater risk of abuse than school children. A number of methodological and substantive concerns were also raised over the conduct and conclusions of the review which, as a result, became the subject of a Select Committee inquiry (Stafford, 2012). The Committee upheld the opinion that the review had been rushed, poorly conducted and presented unsafe conclusions (Stafford, 2012). Despite this, Badman's recommendations were accepted in their entirety by the Children's Minister, Delyth Morgan. They only failed to become law as a result of timing. The calling of the general election of 2010 meant that the Children, Schools and Families Bill 2009, to which the clause on home education was attached, became subject to the wash-up procedure prior to the dissolving of parliament. As part of the brokering with the Opposition to pass the bill quickly during this period, the clause on home education was dropped.

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND HOME EDUCATION

Research, alongside personal testimonies, anecdotal evidence, home educators' newsletters and submitted evidence in court cases, shows that home educators span a range of educational ideas and practices. Within this range there appears to be a strong and politically troubling strand of thinking referred to as autonomous education in the UK, 'unschooling' in North America and 'natural learning' in Australia and New Zealand (Thomas and Pattison, 2007). This line of thinking is most closely associated in the UK with the work of the American educationalist, John Holt. Following a career as a schoolteacher Holt became a champion of home education, convinced that schooling had inherent shortcomings which prevented it being a successful educational means in any form (Holt, 1997). Instead he argued that 'the human animal is a learning animal' (Holt, 1980, online, no page numbers) and that learning would occur naturally as part of the process of living without deliberate or systematic adult intervention. Holt is not explicit about his philosophical antecedents. His belief in learning as an innate human instinct could be allied with Rousseau's emphasis on child-led learning stimulated by innate motivation and the natural environment, whilst his stress on the uniqueness and pro-activity of individual learners could perhaps be linked to Dewey (Philips and Siegel, 2013). Where Holt departs from these two most evidently is in his lack of faith in the role of adults as teachers; 'organised education operates on the assumption that children learn only when and only what and only because we teach them. This is not true. It is very close to one hundred per cent false' (Holt, 1989, p. 160). Under the influence of Holt's work autonomous education has evolved into a popular practice; its philosophy described by one of its advocates as 'autonomous education, in addition to being centred in the child's intrinsic motivation, demands a broad definition of education, a step back from the products and outcomes thinking of conventional education, a positive view of children as creative and rational and an ability to conceive of problems as having solutions' (J. Fortune-Wood, undated, p. 3).

As home educators in the UK are not obliged to follow the national curriculum, take GCSEs or standard tests, make advanced plans or keep school hours, terms or timetables, the pursuit of autonomous education as a child-led, evolving and organic form of education is a practical possibility at home in a way which would be impossible for any mainstream school to emulate. Its practice, however, has been responsible for some of the tensions between home-educating families and local authorities who are likely to approach home education with a view of education based on school practices and school-style evidence.

During the course of the Badman Review, the philosophical divide between autonomous home educators and advocates of education as schooling created a communicative impasse, as reported to the Select Committee (Thomas and Pattison, 2009). Despite the broad philosophical and theoretical history of educational thinking, the review demonstrated that in the political and public arena at least, education has become synonymous with schooling (Suissa, 2006). The opportunity which the review offered to open

up a debate on alternative education and its relationship to mainstream conventions was lost. The Review's agenda of political control over education undoubtedly contributed to this failure of communication, but the resulting standoff also illustrates the genuine difficulties of talking across the philosophical divides of education.

Badman's effective banning of autonomous education failed to become law in 2010 but the thinking behind his recommendations has not gone away; further government reviews held in Wales in 2013 and in Northern Ireland in 2014 (Nicholson, 2014) continue to pursue greater regulation of home education in much the same vein. Such greater regulation ethically demands greater understanding. This article is inspired by the now urgent need to find new ways to understand and communicate the alternative in education.

GROUNDING THINKING ON THE ALTERNATIVE

For home educators arguing their case in public and policy arenas the comparison between their views and practices and those of mainstream schooling are inevitable. Implicitly and explicitly such comparisons fall into two main categories: those of 'better' and 'different'.

Home education is presented as being both 'better' than school and, in its uniqueness, 'different' from other forms of education. Although individual circumstances and detail can vary tremendously (Thomas, 1998; Thomas and Pattison, 2007; Rothermel, 2011) 'better' and 'different' are words which are frequently echoed in parents' explanations of why they decide to home educate:

> When I was in school I thought there must be a better way.

> The education system is doing what we think is secondary. It's not for problem solving. We have different views.

> I looked around and was not very impressed with what I saw. Hell! I can do better than that.

> I felt she could achieve more in a different environment and in a different way (Home-educating parents, in Thomas, 1998, pp. 31, 34).

The ideas of better and different are key in explicating the relationship between the mainstream and the alternative. Parents want the best for their children and find this best (or at least 'better') form of education outside school. As a heterogeneous breakaway group however, the enactment of 'better' often involves developing practices and ideas which are fundamentally different from school and indeed from other examples of home education. The ideas of 'better' and 'different' are frequently mixed together; indeed, some might argue that without difference education cannot become better. However, there are also expressions of conflict between the ideals of better and different. The following quote from a home-educating parent encapsulates the push and pull of ideas where better and different meet:

> At the moment we are experiencing [one of our daughter's] peer group making the transition to secondary school. So there's a lot of choice going on. Parents are choosing the schools and in a way I recognize that for what it is. Which is a false sense of control so they will think that choosing this above that school they will have gotten a better package. I don't believe that. I want the girls to stay in control of their own destiny if you like. Where I question it is when perhaps they aren't meeting the targets that are there in the school world and the most visible one for me would perhaps be writing (Home-educating parent, in Thomas and Pattison, 2007, p. 45).

In this quote the desire to be different in terms of children controlling their own destinies, as opposed to accepting the package offered by school, runs into the problem that in at least one area of education, writing, the girls are not doing as well as, let alone better than, school standards. This mother's questioning shows how the rationales of better and different can become a problematic combination with an uncertainty about which should take precedence in the ideas of home education. Her interrogation highlights what Robert Rotenberg in his analysis of power struggles calls 'the persistence of an unresolvable opposition between the symbols of order and the symbols of liberty' (Rotenberg, quoted by Johnson, 2014, p. 6). This opposition, on both theoretical and practical levels, is one that hampers the understanding of home education for critics and practitioners alike and weighs heavily on the development of alternative philosophies.

HOME EDUCATION AS BETTER

Its supporters often express home education as something either intrinsically or, at least potentially, better than its school counterpart. The idea of 'better' here stretches between an individual choice about a specific child and cultural and political ideas about what constitutes a 'good' education. Being a parent, as Judith Suissa (2006) argues, is a subjective position which begs creative responses to a particular child within the context of particular circumstances. Families make decisions about children's education based on what they consider best for that child rather than on some form of comparative 'better' measured against the choices of others. In this way there is no contradiction between the choice of best for one child being different from the choice of best for another. This type of individual decision, however, is made within a socio-political context in which 'discussions about education are dominated by measurement and comparisons of educational outcomes and ... these measurements as such seem to direct much of educational policy and, through this, also much of educational practice' (Biesta, 2009, p. 43).

Such comparisons, based overwhelmingly on public examination results, are made internationally, nationally and locally and have become the benchmark of educational excellence whilst bypassing and even submerging the questions of good for what and good for whom (Biesta, 2009). In such a climate it is inevitable that home education will receive similar comparative treatment and that the arguments that this is 'best for my child', where

the perceived best deviates from the dominant view, are seen by those in authority as weak and subjective.

To compete with the league-tables-led, mainstream position on what constitutes a good education requires a comparative argument based on the qualification of why home might be better than school as a form of education. There is no *a priori* reason as to why the qualification of 'better' should be limited to exam results. Other educational concerns such as the development of moral standards, the nurturing of creativity, the pursuit of talent and passions, are also cited by home educators as better pursued from home[2] (Thomas, 1998; Thomas and Pattison, 2007). To move from the subjective realm of individual best to presenting a better form of education, however, requires that whatever criteria are chosen these must enable some form of common measurement by which assessment and comparison between home and school can be made. So, if home education is held to be in some sense better than school then some means of quantifying and measuring what it is that is 'better' needs to be found and applied to both situations. It is possible that such a means of measurement could be specifically designed in order to carry out this comparison but to date such evidence-based comparisons as there have been have adopted the measurement criteria of schools—performance in standardised tests. Thus, for instance, Rothermel (2004) tested a cohort of British home-educated children on the Performance Indicators for Primary Schools scale in order to conduct a comparison of their results with those of children of the same age in school.

Comparison like this implies an acceptance of the justification for, and the efficacy of, schooling's means of measurement. It also, perhaps more significantly, implies an acceptance of the aims and designated desired outcomes of schooling. In this acceptance home education can be seen as being on the same ideological track as school, justifying itself by the desire to do better than school. Such evaluation fits into the political framework for education which Peim and Flint describe as a 'continual drive for improvement' (Peim and Flint, 2009, p. 342). The road of progress would appear endless, at least until perhaps the pinnacle position in the international league tables is gained or some other measureable criteria is fulfilled, such as former Prime Minister Tony Blair's aspiration that 50% of the population should be graduates (Biesta, 2009). The achievement of such a goal could perhaps, for some, represent education 'brought to perfection' as Foucault describes the utopian dreams of society (1967, online, no page numbers). For others the idea of a perfect education remains, like any utopia, 'fundamentally unreal' (Foucault, 1967, online, no page numbers).

HOME EDUCATION AS DIFFERENT

Ruth Levitas describes the notion of utopia as being 'broadly about the desire for a better way of life' (Levitas, quoted by Johnson, 2006, p. 82). She then goes on to argue that 'a core aspect of utopia is the space to think and feel outside existing normative and conceptual frameworks, or to desire differently' (Johnson, 2006, p. 82). Yet the desire for the better way of life and the desire to be different cannot be simply brought together in home

education where the pursuit of difference finds itself ensnared in norms and beliefs that underpin the utopian ideal of doing 'better than school'. Home education as the pursuit of 'different' must, as a prerequisite of different, involve the shedding of the means by which a comparison with mainstream education can be made. The disassociation implied by creating 'difference' must include, eventually, abandoning all the benchmarks, hallmarks, and ultimately conceptions and discourse of schooling—the very things through which the comparison of the two sets of ideas might be made.

Alternative education which pursues 'difference' brings with it the vision of a quite distinctive utopia; one which requires not the perfecting of a system already in place but the dismantling of swathes of understanding about not only education but society, the nature of childhood, the needs of the political economy, the practices of democracy and ultimately, what it means to be a person. Alternative education, rather than representing an advancement towards utopia through the perfecting of what already exists, becomes a pursuit of the good life through a destruction of socially entrenched norms and fundamental beliefs. The achievement of a utopian state based on difference seems even more unlikely than the pursuit of something already recognised that society is aiming for, but has not yet reached—the zenith of a top position in the league tables or half the population achieving a university degree.

The difficulties raised in the conflict between 'different' and 'better' are not merely personal for home educators or theoretical for educational thinkers. As the Badman Review illustrated the consequences of pursuing difference have become politicised to the point that different practices (as represented by autonomous home education) have become the target of legislation which would effectively outlaw them.

Laying out his proposals for the BBC News Channel, Mr Badman summed up:

> They [parents wishing to home educate] will be judged on their plans. These statements should contain some milestones for children to achieve . . . For example by the age of eight, I think they should be autonomous learners, able to read. . . . An education should be broad and balanced and enable children to make choices (Badman, 2009b).

In this summing up Badman supplies some of the criteria by which alternative education can be compared to, and therefore judged in accordance with, its mainstream counterpart. Education should be planned, should encompass age-related norms of achievement, should involve designated spheres of dependence and independence and should adhere to apparently acontextual designations of 'breadth' and 'balance'. Such criteria offer the means for measuring and assessing home education as 'better' (or worse) than school.

The review balked at offering any credence to home education which set its sights on the possibilities of being different from school. On the matter of autonomous education Badman offered his opinion in the form

of a quote from lawyers in a local authority legal action brought against a home-educating family:

> In our judgement 'education' demands at least an element of supervision; merely to allow a child to follow its own devices in the hope that it will acquire knowledge by imitation, experiment or experience in its own way and in its own good time is neither systematic nor instructive … such a course would not be education but, at best, childminding (*Harrison and Harrison v Stevenson*, quoted by Badman, 2009a, p. 44).

For these lawyers, the account of education presented did not sufficiently adhere to the mainstream definition which was acting as the conceptual template from which a judgement of the alternative could be made. The education under discussion demanded a reorientation from the perspective of 'better' to the perspective of 'different'; a reorientation which neither these lawyers, nor Mr Badman, were prepared to make. This is not simply a matter of political caution and circumspect conformity. The philosophical problem runs deep for all who might find themselves concerned with what education 'is'. Once an educational alternative loses the grounds by which it can be compared with mainstream schooling we have no current means of justification left by which it can be designated as actually being 'education' at all.

If, for example, advance planning is a prerequisite of education, then 'education' cannot exist without it. Thus, to attempt to describe education without such plans is impossible; some provision must be made for the educational criteria named as 'planning'. If this cannot be done because planning is not part of the provision then whatever it is that is being described cannot be designated as education. We cannot even get so far as to discuss its potential. Such conceptual difficulties are substantial and are an on-going feature of attempts to legislate home education in the successive government reviews of recent years. Yet they are not the only boundary to be faced. 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 … either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

Whilst making provision for education outside school, the law itself begs the question of what an 'efficient full time education' might be, yet leaves no doubt that whatever arrangements under whatever philosophy are made, they must be recognisable (and defendable) under the terms of mainstream education.

HOME EDUCATION AND THE IDEA OF THE HETEROTOPIA

For the different trajectory to be developed in any significant way the need to be tied to the criteria of school for purposes of comparison must be broken. In this sense, the idea of alternative education is simply not a big enough conceptual space; it is the grounds for alternatives *to* education

rather than alternatives *within* education that must be sought. Yet as the Badman Review illustrated we are a long way from the political, practical or even theoretical freedom inherent in following the different trajectory in any substantial form or length. Nevertheless, the question of whether to align oneself with the idea of difference or the idea of better is one which every advocate of home education and every researcher into alternative education must confront, for it is a basic decision from which all else will flow.

For those who choose the position of 'better than school' there is still a long way to go and a lot of open ground over which to explore how 'better' might manifest itself, how it can be recognised and how and when it might be measured for comparative purposes. But it seems safe to say that the 'better' trajectory sets up the relationship between mainstream school and its alternatives in a way which at least makes the debate possible.

For those who choose the position of difference, the relationship with mainstream schooling cannot be abandoned, but remains an important juxtaposition which encompasses not just educational values and practices but also many of society's other key moral and metaphysical standpoints. Alternative education that aligns itself with the position of difference continues to be created through its relationship to school although its practices and ideology stand in contrast to those of school. In this sense home education which pursues difference fits Foucault's description of a heterotopia. Foucault introduced this idea as a way of exploring anomalous spaces within society 'which are endowed with the curious property of being in relation with all the others, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize or invert the set of relationships designed, reflected, or mirrored by themselves' (Foucault, 1967, online, no page numbers). Foucault (1967) lays out a number of features of heterotopias which can be used as points of departure to discuss the relationships between heterotopias and the mainstream society surrounding them. In doing so it is not necessary to demonstrate that a social space 'is' a heterotopia but rather to use the ideas offered, as Foucault elsewhere suggests, as tools of exploration (Foucault, cited in Patton, 1979).

In the following I shall concentrate on three of the ideas proffered by Foucault: those of deviation, crises and juxtaposition, and on the theme of disturbance which these three may cause. I shall consider these for the light they may bring to the physical, political and discursive aspects of home education, in the latter case also drawing on Derrida to elucidate some of the difficulties of approaching education through alternative practice.

HOME EDUCATION AS AN ELSEWHERE

Unlike utopias, heterotopias may be actual locations; some of Foucault's examples are prisons, holiday camps, museums and psychiatric hospitals. However, it is not the physical situation that creates the heterotopia, rather the network of relationships that determine how the social space of the heterotopia is constructed and experienced.

In contrast to the examples offered by Foucault, home education is not a place and as an example of a heterotopia it fails to be located anywhere,

being perhaps best described as an 'elsewhere'; a negative space created by the physical location of schooling in specific grounds and buildings. It can, however, be seen as a space created through its suspension, inversion and negation of society's educational norms although the space created in this way is not an ordered or consistent one. The level of deviation from the norms upheld by schooling is highly variable, both between families and within families across time (Thomas and Pattison, 2007). Home-educating families using set curriculums and working in a timetabled, structured way towards public examinations, for example, may be in the physical location of home but are arguably operating in the space of schooling. Those pursuing autonomous education, however, adhere more to Foucault's idea that heterotopias are 'occupied by individuals whose behaviour deviates from the current average or standard' (Foucault, 1967, online, no page numbers).

Whilst home education does not occupy a physical location there is certainly a physical strand to it. Children who are not in school are clear deviants from the social norm in terms of their physical presence in places and times that contradict the normative view of children; in the shopping centre or park, on the street or in the garden during school hours. A seven-year-old child playing in the park with their parent at 10AM on a weekday term time morning manifests a physical deviation from the norm that in itself confronts the cultural arrangements of age, status and order. A group of young teenagers together in such a space at such a time without adult supervision are likely to be deemed shockingly in contravention of not only the normal but also the 'right'. An illustration of how upsetting such a deviance can be is offered by the group 'Action for Home Education' who quote the following from Brighton and Hove Local Authority truancy policy:

> A uniformed Police Officer accompanied by an Education Welfare Officer (EWO) will stop all children who are out of school during school hours and who appear to be of school age whether they are accompanied by an adult or not (Action for Home Education, 2008 online, no page numbers).

Being the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time is more than a physical stepping outside the normative order. It is a disturbance of the relationships that delineate who we are and where we fall in the social order and may therefore be interpreted as a challenging of the official order even when there are no other grounds to suppose that a transgression of the law is taking place. This appears to be the construal of Milton Keynes' Local Authority who are reported as providing truancy-sweep officials with a briefing paper which,

> . . . indicates the presumption of guilt and a requirement to prove one's status with the clear threat of possible arrest or removal of the child and an incitement to interrogate the child on their home education before they can be believed (Action for Home Education, 2008, online, no page numbers).

In such examples the presence of a child outside the designated spatial and temporal regime set up by schooling is sufficient to warrant action on the part of officialdom in its role of upholding the normal, even where the normal and the law do not coincide.

As well as being places to contain deviance Foucault also argues that heterotopias can be formed by crises, his examples of which are life crises; periods of life that are other or different such as pregnancy or adolescence. Whilst the physical fact of a school-aged child not being in school can cause immense discomfort to others, the idea of heterotopias formed through life crises may more accurately reflect the experiences of some home-educating families and children. A school-age child who is not a school child might be considered one of these hard to categorise, uncomfortably positioned, although temporary, anomalies, but the idea of crises can also be used more literally with regard to children who are not in school for reasons of school phobia (M. Fortune-Wood, 2000), bullying, sexual harassment, school induced illness (Thomas, 1998), and extreme unhappiness up to and including suicidal behaviour (BBC, 2010). The child who cannot attend school because he or she cannot emotionally conform to their expected physical presence in school is certainly in what Foucault describes as 'a state of crises with respect to the society or the environment in which he lives' (Foucault, 1967, online, no page numbers). However home education does not represent an officially sanctioned possible solution in such circumstances. Government guidelines stipulate that,

> Schools must not seek to persuade parents to educate their children at home as a way of avoiding an exclusion or because the child has a poor attendance record. ... If the pupil has a poor attendance record, the school and local authority must address the issues behind the absenteeism and use the other remedies available to them (Elective Home Education Guidelines for Local Authorities (England), quoted by Nicholson, 2014).

Such children are more comparable to Foucault's honeymoon couple whose sex life must begin away in an 'elsewhere', a heterotopia without geographical location. For these families home education can be seen as representing that 'elsewhere', an unofficial sanctuary that cannot be promoted or even regarded as an approved possibility but which is that 'privileged, sacred or forbidden' (Foucault, 1967, online, no page numbers) place that offers a haven from the rigours of normality.

CHALLENGE OR DEFENCE?

Johnson (2006) argues that whilst heterotopias are often seen as points of resistance to the dominant culture there is little to further substantiate this. However, in the case of home education, its very existence can be seen as a challenge to the order in a society where the attendance of children in school is generally seen as the upholding of, in another of Foucault's phrases, a 'regime of truth' (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr, 2000).

Home education is legal, and its continued protection in law is assured by politicians whenever questions about its legality arise (for example Michael Gove MP quoted by Isaby, 2010), but this does not assure its widespread acceptance nor offer any inherent guarantees about its freedoms. Had the recommendations of the Badman Review become law, educational freedom would have been severely curtailed and although home education would have continued, conformity with the mainstream would have been forced upon it. Without such containment home education appears to have a continuing potential to disturb, both as a political idea (illustrated by Tom Collins MP's description of home education as a 'desperately dangerous notion' quoted by Rothermel, 2010) and as an issue that needs to be dealt with by authority. As a result Rothermel (2010) has argued that since the Badman Review home-educated children and their families are being increasingly problematized by those in authority.

Part of this problematisation revolves around the fact that home education remains an unknown quantity. Absence from official statistics in the highly regulated world of education where to count is to know (attendance figures, league tables, national and international attainment statistics, university entrants) places home education in the heterotopian position of incompatibility and incomparability with its normative counterpart. The unknown elements of home education, the lack of basic demography, as well as the absence of such detail as exam achievement, seem themselves to represent a challenge to authority where being in possession of certain facts is a major contribution to a sense of official security and political assurance.

Such feelings of unease extend beyond the spheres of educational policy and official regulation into a more general disquiet at the disturbance of social and educational norms. A caller-in to a Radio Two discussion programme on home education put the view that,

> I think home schooling borders on abuse anyway. It deprives children of valuable social skills which they develop in a school environment and I don't believe that they can receive at home as thorough an education as they would in a school (caller to Jeremy Vine Show, 2009).

Some home educators have felt this kind of disapproval much closer to home:

> My parents are horrified and always have been … I have … some friends who give me terrible warnings and tell me I'm irresponsible and depriving them … (Home-educating parents, in Thomas, 1998, p. 121).

What may appear from the outside to constitute a challenge to the normal, or a resistance of the mainstream status quo, may be experienced by those on the inside as a position of defence rather than attack.

> Everyone hopes deep down that you'll fail with the children. If they do well they say you are lucky.

People hassled me: 'Is he learning?' 'You should take him back to school you know.'

You are always on the defensive. People challenge what we do but we don't challenge them (Home-educating parents, in Thomas, 1998, pp. 120–1).

However, home education can also be seen as a critique of the mainstream from which its practitioners seek to separate themselves through both purpose and practice. The heterotopia, as Foucault argues of captivity, (Elden and Crampton, 2007, p. 8) can be reversed becoming then a site from which the educational, cultural, political and religious beliefs of mainstream society may be othered. Robert Kunzman, researching amongst conservative Christians home educating in the USA, cites the explicit aim of some parents to 'protect' their children from mainstream views and 'to prevent their children from being *of* the world' (Kunzman, 2009, p 159), in other words to construct and maintain an othered view of the society which pertains beyond the enclave of their own beliefs.

Children contained within the environment of home education may be encultured into morality and belief systems as well as educational ideas which are not just different from the mainstream, but may run counter to them in potentially inflammatory ways. The extent to which the 'othering' of mainstream society takes place in home education, both potentially and actually, and the extent to which this should be tolerated is a matter of political concern. It is precisely the view that home education may lead to the establishment of 'parallel societies' which lies behind the German government's continued outlawing of home education (Farris, 2012). The principle that society needs common values is a political argument for curtailing the extent to which the othering of the mainstream should be permitted:

Respect for difference should not be confused with approval for approaches that would splinter us into countless warring groups. Hence an argument that tolerance for diverse views and values is a foundational principle does not conflict with the notion that the state can and should limit the ability of intolerant homeschoolers to inculcate hostility to difference in their children (Ross, quoted by Farris, 2012, p. 14).

The deviation represented by home education (perhaps as it plays into other ideas of social, political and moral deviation) may prove too high a price for the ideal of tolerance to pay.

HETEROTOPIAS AND THE DISCOURSE OF EDUCATION

It is perhaps in the sphere of ideas and concepts that home education presents its greatest challenge and finds its greatest resonance with Foucault's idea of the heterotopia. The dominant discourse of education expresses, and is expressed through, the dominant form of education and these two things maintain a tight conceptual hold over not only what education is but also

over what its future possibilities might be. Those at the margins are left with the difficult task of presenting 'other' ideas through the pre-given categories, concepts and expressive and ideological means of the mainstream. So it is that describing alternative education often slips into the kind of talk that outlines a negative position; repudiating or suspending mainstream concerns yet still employing and therefore mirroring or reflecting the conventional terms of education. As an example, information provided by the Department for Children, Schools and Families sets out the following guidelines for parents wishing to home educate:

> Home educating parents are not required to:
> teach the National Curriculum
> provide a broad and balanced education
> have a timetable
> have premises equipped to any particular standard
> set hours during which education will take place
> have any specific qualifications
> make detailed plans in advance
> observe school hours, days or terms
> give formal lessons
> mark work done by their child
> formally assess progress or set development objectives
> reproduce school type peer group socialisation
> match school-based, age-specific standards (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007 and 20013, p. 10).

The list explains what parents do not need to do; in each case invoking a category applicable to mainstream education which then becomes nullified because, although these things are not necessary in the pursuance of alternative education, they continue to provide the contrast by which the space of difference is circumscribed. Thus the relation between the mainstream and the alternative is maintained but has become disjointed, as described by Johnson (2014), the alternative being presented as a negative reflection of the dominant mode of education.

Sifting through the prolific examples to which the concept of the heterotopia has now been applied, Johnson has argued that the divisions between the postulated heterotopia and the 'normality' with which it is contrasted have become, in many examples, difficult to maintain. He argues, therefore that rather than being absolutes 'heterotopias do not exist, except in relation to other spaces' (Johnson, 2014, p. 9). Certainly the outlining of home education in the terms given above would not be comprehensible without the background 'common sense' of education provided by the mainstream. Yet equally the example of home education adheres to Johnson's argument that 'heterotopia is more about a point of view, or a method of using space as a tool of analysis' (Johnson, 2014, p. 9). For whilst the alternative label ensures that home education is seen as a contrast it also the case that in the actual practice of learning at home there is no conceptual, ideological or educational necessity for an equivalent space of such categories as

'curriculum', 'timetable', 'lesson' etc. Nor need there be any gap in thought or analysis, practice or theory, for those who do not adhere to the taxonomy of mainstream education. So, alternative education can be viewed as a heterotopia for which the labels and categories of formal schooling provide the only usable discourse although such categories have no practical or theoretical substance in this different world.

Foucauldian arguments, as discussed by Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace, express the limiting power of discourse where 'truth becomes a function of what *can be* said, written or thought' (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p, 31, italics original). Discourse shapes not just the 'real' but 'the conditions of possibility' (ibid., p. 39) for the real; its power structures run not simply through individuals but through society and history itself. This creates the difficulty that the deconstruction of a structure can only take place through the use of that structure; a paradox explored by Derrida (1978). Any attempt to dismantle or alter the dominant discourse can only be done through language and ideas belonging to that discourse; such criticism is therefore instantly muted by its own position of being part of what it attacks. Derrida illustrates this problem with reference to Nietzsche's attack on metaphysics. A circle describes the relation:

> . . . between history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics . . . we have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest (Derrida, 1978, p. 354).

So, dissent can only come from within. Employing the concepts and categories of mainstream education, replacing such words with different terms, noting their absence, arguing for their irrelevance, attacking their theoretical status or conceptual legitimacy joins an educational position or statement to the dominant discourse and therefore acts to continue and support its power. To understand the 'other' of education requires a decentring from the discourse of education; a feat which Derrida argues is never achievable meaning that the ethnocentrism of the dominant discourse has to be ultimately accepted as an irreducible necessity. However, that does not mean that the issue cannot be addressed:

> It is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself. A problem of economy and strategy (Derrida, 1978, pp. 356–7, italics original).

Talking about educational alternatives offers an opportunity to decentre from the discourse of education and to question, explicitly and systematically, the order of that discourse. To do this it will be necessary to make use of the dominant discourse, acting in the manner of Levi-Strauss' *bricoleur*; borrowing and employing whatever in the way of concepts and language can be usefully put to work (cited by Derrida, 1978). This, Derrida argues,

is the only way to proceed; a new discourse cannot be made from pure and untainted beginnings but must be fashioned from what already lies to hand. According to this, education which seeks to locate itself on the trajectory of difference has no choice but to acknowledge its common starting point with the mainstream and to move strategically away from that point; crafting its vision from that which it seeks to reject.

HETEROTOPIAS AS PLACES OF DISTURBANCE

Socially, educationally, politically, academically and even personally home education illustrates Johnson's description that 'heterotopias are fundamentally disturbing places' (Johnson, 2006, p. 84) and this seems to be so for those on the inside, as well as those on the outside. Home education offers what Johnson (2012) refers to as 'a variety of seemingly paradoxical meanings'. It is legal, yet the site of much official unrest; a point of political resistance and a point of personal defence; heavily frowned on and idealistically championed. It is described both as a safe haven for children and families and as a form of abuse. It physically disrupts the social rules of time and space, and conceptually disturbs the cultural and social binaries of home and school. It is an othered and an othering space of society. Even the label 'home education' or perhaps more explicitly, 'home school' challenges the organising categories of home and school, the functions of each and the relationship expected to exist between them. Incompatible strands of meaning crisscross the lives and words of home educators, who must somehow find ways to a liveable, if not logically explicable, position which is able to encompass such contradictions. Contradiction is also a component of the words and actions of those that sit in official authority over home education where the terms of the dominant discourse and the socio-moral acceptable limits to freedom play as significant a role as any understanding of what education is or might be in the future.

RESEARCH AND THE HETEROTOPIA

All of this contains inherent philosophical and methodological problems for those thinking and working under the umbrella of educational research, policy and philosophy. Whether and in what ways challenge to the dominant discourse, its measurements and assessments should and can be made will play a significant role in the future of home education. If meaning is taken from the comparative trajectory as in Rothermel (2004) then the dominant discourse is extended. On the other hand, if 'different' means of defining success are to be chosen, or indeed if alternative education rejects the relevancy of notions of success and failure to its purpose, then the philosophical legitimacy of such positions will need to be defended on 'other' grounds; grounds yet to be established. The means of such establishment, however, will surely require a paradoxical return to the discourse of education even as the alternative attempts to extricate itself from the grip of the dominant.

IMPLICATIONS

In the past few decades, home education has found a groundswell of appeal. Where, as in the UK, it is not subject to school-style regulation, the exploration of alternative educational ground has been rapid and profound. Home education has creative and flexible possibilities which are, for the most part, denied to the drawn-out political manoeuvring of the mainstream. But the radical innovation which such freedom allows has, inevitably, a dark side: worry, fear, challenge, disturbance. Desiring the different is not easy; it takes personal and social courage, and politically it means that, in Rotenberg's words, at least temporarily, liberty must take precedence over maintaining the familiar order. For policy makers, as illustrated by the Badman Review and through continuing attempts to impose tighter legislation, the imposition of the dominant discourse is highly tempting. However, if the response is to quell the innovation and to err on the side of what appears to be caution we have not avoided a risk, just taken a different one towards the repression of a social movement and the dangers of totalising education into an entrenched position from which it will become ever harder to move on. There are implications here for all involved in education and for all concerned with how society deals with difference. As political discomfort about how to handle alternative education grows so does the urgency with which new philosophies are needed to embrace and traverse a new landscape.

The rise of home education offers the chance to consider the legitimacy of current understandings of education and the limits and restrictions of the conceptual tools on which this understanding is founded. Treating alternative education as a heterotopia is perhaps a means for opening up the current enframing of educational thought and reassessing our desires. Using the idea of the heterotopia is a strategy (as recommended by Derrida) by which new ideas can be explored through old ones and the weight of the dominant discourse can perhaps be sufficiently lightened to glimpse the possibilities which a different taxonomy of education would allow. Despite this, the central dilemmas remain unaltered. For at the heart of the contradiction between better and different lies the ultimate question of what is a 'good' education, and what is the best way of achieving such an education and how do we know when we have. These are issues that neither research nor philosophy is empowered to answer; that the best that can be provided will be contingent, tentative and temporary lines of flight is a warning not about the alternative but about the whole enterprise of education.

How the philosophy of education rises to these challenges will be a reflection on the discipline itself as well as an important political tool in shaping the future of home education and its regulation. If we do not address the difficulties of the other then we delude ourselves over the whole field because without such exploration the bigger question of 'what is appropriate or ethical is never fully raised and thus it is effectively denied altogether' (Smedts, 2009, p. 87). The disservice will be wrought not just on the families and children of current and future home education but also on the whole

enterprise of education and on any vision of how fresh ideas or new-found evidence can be channelled into real future possibilities.

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NOTES

1. Seven year old Khyra Ishaq starved to death in her mother's and her mother's partner's care at their home in Birmingham in 2008. Six months before her death she had been withdrawn from school to be home educated. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-10770907
2. Many home educators are quick to point out that home education does not mean education at home but education which is facilitated from a home base.

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