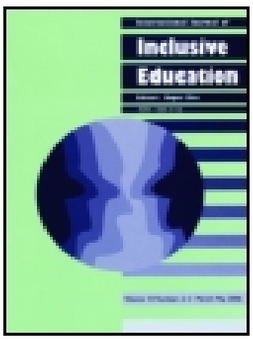

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The home-education of children with special needs or disabilities in the UK: views of parents from an online survey

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The home-education of children is one 'choice' of provision that is often overlooked or unreported in the debate on inclusive education for children with disabilities or special educational needs. This study aimed to access the views of these hard-to-reach home-educating families through an online survey. Twenty-seven parents, with at least one child with special educational needs or disabilities/being educated at home, responded, and over two-thirds identified 'push' factors away from the school as their main reasons for educating their children at home, such as bad experiences with formal provision and the perceived failure of schools to meet their child's needs adequately. A majority of children had been at a mainstream school at the time of the decision to home-educate and 48% of the children were described as having an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Findings are discussed in relation to the 'personalisation' agenda of education in the UK.

Keywords: home-education; children and families; disabilities; special educational needs; personalisation; online survey

Introduction

Where and how children with special educational needs (SEN[1]) or disabilities[2] are educated continues to be the focus of significant debate and discussion in the UK. Government policy has directly promoted 'inclusion'; narrowly defined as the placement of children with SEN or disabilities[3] in mainstream, rather than special, schools (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001). Pro-inclusion advocates argue that inclusion is a basic human right (e.g. Thomas 1997). Others are concerned that children's needs are not being met in mainstream classrooms and favour an approach to school placement that is based on an evaluation of individual needs and preferences rather than a 'wholesale' policy of inclusion for all (e.g. Lindsay 2003). At the centre of this debate is the issue of parental choice and the extent to which parents or carers feel they can influence decisions and/or make choices about how and where their children are educated. The evidence suggests that many parents experience a lack of involvement and autonomy in this respect such that:

> the system is failing to meet the needs of their children causing frustration and conflict. (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006, vol. 1, 13, para 23)

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The extent of Parliamentary concern about this was reflected in the subsequent setting up of the Lamb Inquiry (2008–09) to scrutinise ways of increasing parental confidence in the SEN assessment system. However, that inquiry's remit focuses on structures within the conventional systems (i.e. not home-educating). Typically, parental frustrations are presented in the context of choice of *formal* educational provision, i.e. whether a child is placed in a mainstream or special setting (or has access to both). However, this overlooks a significant minority of parents who have exercised the ultimate choice with respect to educational provision and removed their children from formal schooling altogether – those educating their children at home. Notably, significant reviews of SEN provision (e.g. Audit Commission 2002; House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006, 2007) fail to even consider this an option and yet some evidence suggests the number of children being educated at home is on the increase (Hopwood et al. 2007). Here we place a spotlight on this under reported and little researched area to explore the experiences and motivations of some families educating children with SEN at home and question whether this is really a 'choice' of provision at all.

Background

Families educating children with SEN came to our attention whilst conducting a previous piece of research on the experiences of disabled children and their families (Lewis, Robertson, and Parsons 2005). One strand of this involved an online survey seeking parental views about schooling. A small, but significant, minority (7%) of respondents indicated that they were educating their child with a disability or SEN at home. Frustration with the system was evident:

> I'm so fed up with the whole thing that we are considering home education. This is not something we really want to do, but the whole system appears to be failing' – parent of a child, with Asperger's Syndrome, currently attending a mainstream school. (Lewis, Robertson, and Parsons 2005)

And, quite rightly, so too was frustration with us at failing to consider their views:

> Why were we (parents of home educated children) not included in the survey? Why did we have to unearth it ourselves? Will our views be included? Or are our children to be brushed under the carpet again?

Our interest (and conscience) pricked, we were determined to find out more about these 'invisible' families.

In the UK the choice to educate children at home is a legal option; parents have the right to educate their children, with or without SEN or disabilities, 'at school or otherwise' (The Education Act 1996, England and Wales). There are a number of voluntary organisations supporting parents through online information and local support groups in the UK (e.g. Home Education UK: see http://www.home-education.org.uk; Home Education Advisory Service: see http://www.heas.org.uk; Education Otherwise: see http://www.education-otherwise.org). However, a search for further information reinforced their apparent invisibility, at least in research terms. Whilst there is a small but growing research interest in home-education generally in the UK (and elsewhere) (e.g. Hopwood et al. 2007; Rothermel 2003, 2004; Taylor and

Petrie 2000), there is very limited information about families of children with SEN, despite some explicitly citing lack of adequate provision for children with SEN as a main reason for educating their children at home (Hopwood et al. 2007; Rothermel 2004). Indeed, a small-scale study in Western Australia concluded:

> There appears to be a total lack of research on the home schooling of children with disabilities … worldwide. (Reilly, Chapman, and O'Donoghue 2002)

The only study focusing on home-education and children with SEN in the UK was published since we carried out the present study. Arora (2006) surveyed 65 home-educating families and conducted interviews with twelve of these within one Local Authority (LA) in England. Eleven (17%) survey respondents cited 'SEN not met' as their main reason for home-educating their children, making this (equal only to bullying) the most frequently mentioned factor. Also, eight of the 17 young people across the twelve families interviewed were reported as having SEN (none had a statement of SEN[4]). Many families reported substantial periods of trying to make school 'work' for their children, but had reluctantly withdrawn their children from school following particularly stressful periods or events. This (and the views from some parents in Lewis et al. 2005) suggests that the motivations and experiences of parents educating children with SEN at home could be very different from the (often) carefully planned and ideological decisions of many parents home-educating non-disabled children (e.g. Knowles, Marlow, and Muchmore 1992).

The scale of such decisions is difficult to judge, due partly to the absence of any statutory requirement in the UK for parents/carers to register an intention to home-educate their children with their LA (although parents are required to 'deregister' their child from school). Furthermore, some parents may never send their children to school and so children will not be known to LAs. Mindful of this limitation, Hopwood et al. (2007) estimate there are approximately 16,000 home-educating families *known* to their LA in England (a three-fold increase compared with Petrie, Windrass, and Thomas 1999).

The proportion of these educating children with SEN is equally difficult to determine. Hopwood et al. (2007) reported that 5% of their sample of children educated at home had a statement of SEN (compared with 2.9% nationally), although this was likely to be an underestimate of the actual number since many children with SEN do not have a statement. Official figures in England suggest that the number of children with statements educated other than in school via arrangements made by their parents (as of January 2004; Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2004) is 1070. However, these figures do not include children with SEN without statements and are based on families known to local authorities. Thus, there are likely to be many more families than this figure suggests who are home-educating children with disabilities or SEN throughout the UK. Although the status of their educational provision is unclear, this is likely to include some of the children 'missing' or permanently excluded from school each year (DfES 2004; Ofsted 2004; Broadhurst, Paton, and May-Chahal 2005; Visser, Daniels, and MacNab 2005).

Whilst the exact number may be impossible to determine, there is a sizeable number of home-educating families with children with SEN whose views and experiences have thus far received scant research attention. It is timely, therefore, to explore their experiences in order to contribute their voices to the important debate about educational provision for children with SEN. Given the difficulties (noted above) in gaining a

representative sample of home-educating parents, we intended this research to be exploratory.

Method

Participants

As some home-educating parents were already known to us, and had expressed a wish for their views to be considered more fully, we decided to use an online survey to follow-up respondents to a prior survey (Lewis, Robertson, and Parsons 2005). This group constituted a viable and relevant basis for further exploration of views in this 'hard to reach' group. Those parents who stated explicitly that they were home-educating their children with disabilities/SEN ($n = 11$) were emailed directly to invite them to complete a new online survey about their views and experiences of home-education. A UK home-education organisation also kindly agreed to disseminate information about the survey via their email distribution list to encourage a larger number of respondents.

Procedure

The online survey could be accessed directly from a link within the email invitation sent directly to parents via the participating home-education organisation or the researchers. The survey was located within the authors' University website and constructed using Sharepoint software. Responses to the survey were confidential and anonymous (unless participants provided optional contact information at the end) and could only be accessed by members of the research team, or the web administrator, via a secure password protected entry point. Before completing the survey, participants read an introductory paragraph about the survey as well as essential information about their (1) voluntary participation, (2) rights to withdraw, (3) confidentiality and (4) anonymity in any subsequent reports. Their completion and submission of the survey was taken as consent to participate. We estimated that the survey took 15–25 minutes to complete depending on the amount of additional information in 'open' comments provided by respondents.

The survey

There were six main sections to the survey (summarised below; see Tables 1–6 for specific questions) which asked parents to either rate responses on a six-point rating scale; provide a categorical response (yes, no, don't know), or write-in additional information to open questions. The six main sections were as follows:

- Background characteristics of parent respondent such as age, gender and ethnic origin.
- Background characteristics of children being educated at home such as age and nature of SEN.
- General information about experiences of home-education including where child was educated when decision was made to home-educate.
- Motivations for home-education (drawn from Rothermel 2003) including school-, child- and parent-related factors.

- Management of/pedagogical approach to home-education.
- Feelings about home-education in the context of their experiences.

Results

Numerical data

The survey software automatically generates a summary of the numbers (and percentages) of responses in each category. These (summed) data are presented for each of the six main sections of the survey in Tables 1–6, respectively. The following text contains a brief summary of the main findings and the relevant table(s) should be viewed in conjunction with this for the exact figures. Note that the value of *n* differs occasionally due to the optional nature of the questions and the percentage values for *n* differ slightly in the tables due to some rounding up or down within categories or question. Rating data (from six-point Likert scales) is grouped below, and in the accompanying tables, into three rather than six categories (annotated as 'grouped ratings' in the tables). For example, on a scale of 'very' to 'not at all', the two highest categories (1 and 2), the two middle categories (3 and 4), and the two lowest categories (5 and 6) are grouped in percentage terms to simplify the presentation of results.

Written-in comments

Responses to, and exact wording of, the open questions are not included in the tables but summarised below. The main purpose of the open questions was to provide space for additional information about the specific questions asked and there was opportunity to expand on responses throughout the survey as well as at the end of each section. Open comments were coded according to a thematic, qualitative analysis and examples are included below to illustrate particular viewpoints or ideas.

Background information about parent respondents

A summary of background characteristics is shown in Table 1. Twenty-seven people responded to the survey and all were living in the UK and parents of the children being educated at home. A majority were white, female, and aged between 40 and 54. Most indicated that they, sometimes in conjunction with a spouse, took responsibility for home-educating their children, and had not been home-educated themselves. The largest proportion – just over half – of respondents identified themselves as Christian and just under a third said they had no religious faith. The most common level of educational attainment was to A-Level or equivalent, followed by Higher Education. Only one respondent was a formally qualified teacher. There was a wide geographical spread of respondents.

Background information about children being educated at home

A summary of background characteristics is shown in Table 2. Most of the children were either primary or secondary school age and receiving 'full-time' home-education. A minority of the children had a statement of SEN. The two broad categories of special needs or disability with the highest number of responses were 'Cognition and

Table 1. Background characteristics of parents educating children with SEN at home.

Parent respondents		*n*	%[b]
Gender	Male	1	4
	Female	23	96
	Missing	3	–
Age (years)	30–34	2	8
	35–39	5	20
	40–44	6	24
	45–49	6	24
	50–54	6	24
	Missing	2	–
Ethnic origin[a]	White	25	96
	Other	1	4
	Missing	1	–
Religious affiliation[a]	Christian	13	57
	Muslim	1	4
	No religion	7	30
	Other	2	9
	Missing	4	–
Educated at home (aged 5–16 years)	Yes	2	8
	No	24	92
	Missing	1	–
Educational attainment	Secondary	4	15
	Sixth form or Further Education	10	38
	Higher Education	8	31
	Postgraduate Study	3	12
	Other	1	4
	Missing	1	–
Formally qualified teacher	Yes	1	4
	No	24	96
	Missing	2	–
Where you live in the UK	Scotland	3	12
	Wales	2	8
	Midlands	4	16
	South West	6	24
	North West	5	20
	North East	1	4
	East	1	4
	South and South East	3	12
	Missing	2	–

Notes: [a]Only categories that received responses are included.
[b]Percentages given as a proportion of actual responses.

Table 2. Background characteristics of children with SEN being educated at home.

Children with SEN		*n*	%
Age (years)	0–4	0	–
	5–11	12	46
	11–16	12	46
	17–24	2	8
	25+	0	–
	Missing	1	–
Type of current educational provision	Full-time home-education	24	92
	Part-time home-education	0	–
	Mix of home plus other provision	1	4
	Other	1	4
	Missing	1	–
Statement of SEN	Yes	3	12
	No – never had one	21	81
	No – has been ended	2	8
	Pending	0	–
	Do not know	0	–
	Missing	1	–
Special need or disability (more than one could be ticked)	*Cognition and learning:*		
	Specific learning difficulty	9	64
	Moderate learning difficulty	4	29
	Severe learning difficulty	1	7
	Profound and multiple learning difficulty	0	–
	Behaviour, emotional and social development:		
	Behaviour, emotional and social difficulty	6	75
	Specific mental health needs	0	–
	Both	2	25
	Communication and interaction:		
	Speech, language and communication needs	3	18
	Autistic Spectrum Disorder	13	76
	Both	1	6
	Sensory needs:		
	Visual impairment	1	20
	Hearing impairment	0	–
	Multisensory impairment	4	80
	Physical needs:		
	Motor disability	4	50
	Other physical disabilities/conditions	3	38
	Both	1	13
Child disabled according to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 definition	Yes	17	63
	No	8	30
	Not sure	2	7

Learning needs' where almost two-thirds ticked Specific Learning Difficulty, and 'Communication and Interaction needs' where three-quarters ticked Autistic Spectrum Disorder. In additional comments, some parents said their child had dyslexia and/or dyspraxia, and two said their children were gifted. A majority of parents agreed that their child was disabled according to the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) definition (i.e. does s/he have a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial (lasting more than a year) adverse effect on his/her ability to carry out day-to-day activities?).

General background about experiences of home-education

A majority of parents said their child was at mainstream school at the time of their decision to home-educate and six said they had always considered home-education (Table 3). Most of the children had siblings, of whom two-fifths were also educated at home. The majority of siblings did not have statements of SEN, although in open comments some parents suggested siblings had difficulties but no formal diagnosis or statement. Children had been educated at home for less than one year to more than five years. Just over half of the parents said they little or no choice about the school/college their child attended before the decision to home-educate and a similar proportion said they had been very involved in decisions about school placement.

When asked where they had found out that home-education could be an option for their child (open question), 13/26 (50%) parents mentioned the internet; four mentioned personal contact with someone who knew about and/or was involved in home-education themselves and two people mentioned seeing a television programme; none of the parents mentioned more formal sources of information such as schools or LAs. A majority funded home-education themselves and just under half of the group indicated the LA was involved in monitoring provision. Most said this happened once a year and none indicated that this was an onerous or unpleasant experience; in fact, at least two suggested it was helpful. There was an explicit concern raised by one parent that some LAs try to mislead parents about what is required (being too prescriptive about following the National Curriculum, for example) and visit the home at least every 6 months. There was no evidence of this in any of the comments from other respondents.

Parents drew on a range of support, most frequently citing home-education websites and groups as well the Internet more generally, family and local libraries. In open comments, home-education groups were named as the most supportive and LAs and other professionals as the least supportive. When asked how support for home-education could be improved, a majority mentioned the need for more resources either in the form of help with funding (e.g. for sitting formal exams) or through sharing facilities in the community, including libraries and schools. Some parents were keen that the option for home-educating was more widely promoted and seen as a positive choice which was more widely accepted. Many desired a more positive, collaborative partnership with LAs and schools than experienced at present, for example:

> If schools would be willing to open their mind towards home educating parents – who educate their kids because the education system cannot provide for their needs – then we could work together to provide for our children rather than fight grounds.

Table 3. General background about experiences of home-education.

General experiences of home-education		*n*	%
Does this child have brothers or sisters?	Yes	24	89
	No	3	11
If yes, are they educated at home?	Yes	10	42
	No	13	54
	Thinking about it	1	4
Do any of the brothers or sisters have statements of SEN?	Yes	3	13
	No	21	88
For how long has your child been educated at home?	< 1 year	4	15
	1–2 years	8	30
	2–3 years	5	19
	4–5 years	4	15
	> 5 years	6	22
Where was your child being educated at the time the decision to home-educate was made?	Mainstream	19	70
	Special	1	4
	Mix of special and mainstream	0	0
	Always educated at home	4	15
	Other	3	11
To what extent do you feel that you had a choice about the school/college that your child attended prior to being home-educated?	Lots of choice	4	15
	Some	5	19
	No choice	14	52
[grouped ratings]	Not applicable	4	15
To what extent do you feel that you have been	Very involved	15	55
involved in decisions about the education of your child?	Somewhat	2	7
[grouped ratings]	Not at all involved	10	37
How is the home-education of your child funded?	LEA	0	0
	Self	25	93
	Self with some LEA support	1	4
	Other	1	4
Is the LEA involved in monitoring provision made at home and the progress of your child?	Yes	12	44
	No	12	44
	Not sure	3	11
Which of the following sources of support do you draw upon?	Family	19	70
	Friends	16	59
[tick all that apply]	Home-education websites	26	96
	Home-education groups	21	78
	Local Education Authority	2	7
	Local library	21	78
	General on-line resources	23	85
	Other community groups	6	22
	Other	5	19

Motivations for home-schooling

There were three broad categories of motivations, relating to the school, the parent(s) and the child (adapted from Rothermel 2003) (Table 4). For each category, parents were asked to indicate their most and least applicable motivation from a pre-specified list. Parents often did not choose a 'least applicable' option or responses were evenly spread across categories and so only the 'most applicable' responses are summarised below.

School factors. The majority of most applicable motivations related to dissatisfaction with school either through disappointment/bad experience with formal education or the school failing to accommodate the child's needs. Follow-up comments emphasised the nature of this 'push' away from formal schooling towards home-education,

Table 4. Motivations for home-education.

	Most		Least	
Please specify your most and least applicable motivations for home-education[a] from the following	*n*	%	*N*	%
School factors:				
Always intended to home-educate	4	15	4	15
Disappointment/bad experience with formal education	10	37	1	4
Lack of suitable schools/teaching	2	7	2	7
Teaching and instruction in a particular faith	0	0	5	19
School is inappropriate to our way of life	1	4	4	15
School could not accommodate child's specific needs	8	30	1	4
Other	2	7	0	0
Not applicable	0	0	10	37
Child factors:				
Child was bullied at school	4	15	5	19
Child was unhappy/stressed/depressed at school	13	48	1	4
Child was not included in activities/lessons at school	0	0	3	11
Child wanted to be educated at home	3	11	2	7
Child should be able to work/develop at their own pace	3	11	2	7
Child should enjoy learning and having fun	2	7	2	7
Other	2	7	1	4
Not applicable	0	0	11	41
Parent factors:				
Education is the parent's responsibility	1	4	2	7
We wanted to impart our standards of morality and faith	0	0	3	11
We wanted to be with our children	1	4	0	0
Distrust of societies' beliefs/values	0	0	1	4
My/our own schooling was a bad experience	1	4	3	11
There was some pressure from our peer group	0	0	9	33
We wanted the best for our children	17	63	1	1
Other	6	22	0	0
Not applicable	1	4	8	30

Note: [a]Rothermel (2003).

rather than a welcome, positive choice (although the latter was the case for a small number):

> The number of HE families in the UK is growing rapidly, as many are literally forced to it by bullying in the schools that the school system can't/won't protect their children from, and/or by the failure of the schools to decently address special needs. We are one such family, and know many others. We are not choosing home education as an alternative lifestyle choice, but have been left with no other acceptable option. This problem needs to be recognized and addressed by government urgently.

Child/young person factors. The most frequently ticked motivation (for just under half of the group) was 'child was unhappy/stressed/depressed at school' with others citing bullying; child wanting to be educated at home or being able to develop or work at their own pace.

Parent/carer factors. The majority response was that parents 'wanted the best for our children'. No respondents chose 'we wanted to impart our standards of morality and faith'; 'pressure from our peer group' or 'distrust of societies' beliefs/values'. The second most frequently chosen response was 'other' and this revealed some interesting comments when parents were asked to explain; five parents noted that home-education was very much a forced, and last, choice, for example: 'We were frightened for her sanity and her life'.

Parents could provide open comments about the benefits/advantages of home-education as well as the drawbacks and disadvantages and all 27 respondents did so. Nearly all made reference to the importance of adjusting the style and pace of learning to suit individual needs and the improved enjoyment of learning. Three respondents explicitly mentioned the value of an environment free from bullying, but two of these also mentioned the main factors of pace and individualised learning, for example:

> She is safe from bullies. Education is geared to her actual level not chronological age. She is able to see achievements rather than constant apparent failure at school due to attempting things which are too difficult for her.

Only three parents said there were no drawbacks or disadvantages. Eleven explicitly mentioned the financial strain on the family of educating children at home and seven made reference to the dramatic reduction in time available for themselves and other members of their families, and the drain on their personal energies. Two parents mentioned the burden of society's expectations around schooling and two suggested that home-schooling could not provide all aspects of children's education and they were still 'plugging in' to different elements of mainstream/formal provision for their children, for example: 'Lack of a social group hence the one day a week back into school'.

Management of/pedagogical approach to home-education

A majority of responses indicated that children played an important role in helping to determine the structure or content of the day, either in advance or on the day, and sometimes in conjunction with a tutor (Table 5). Parents rated their general approach to home-education on a scale from 'rigid' to 'flexible'. In the past, half said their approach had been flexible and a third were more rigid, but this had changed over time with nearly three-quarters saying they were now more flexible in their approach. Most

Table 5. Management of pedagogical approach to home-education.

Management of/pedagogical approach to home-education		*n*	%
Which of the following *best* describes how you *usually* approach a school day at home (choose one)?	Tutor creates a timetable/plan well in advance	1	4
	Tutor creates a timetable/plan a day or two before	3	11
	Tutor decides on the day	1	4
	Child decides in advance	1	4
	Child decides on the day	6	22
	Tutor and child decide together in advance	6	22
	Tutor and child decide together on the day	9	33
How would you describe your general approach to home-education in the past, present and future? [for the future try to think about what is most likely] [grouped ratings]	*Past*:		
	Rigid	9	33
	Neutral	4	15
	Flexible	14	52
	Present:		
	Rigid	0	0
	Neutral	8	30
	Flexible	19	71
	Future:		
	Rigid	1	4
	Neutral	5	18
	Flexible	20	74
	Not applicable	1	4
How would you rate the level of the planning of lessons and activities in past, present and future? [grouped ratings]	*Past*:		
	Planned	9	34
	Neutral	11	41
	Unplanned	7	26
	Present:		
	Planned	5	18
	Neutral	14	51
	Unplanned	8	30
	Future:		
	Planned	5	19
	Neutral	13	48
	Unplanned	8	30
	Not applicable	1	4
To what extent do you follow the National Curriculum? [grouped ratings]	Not at all	17	63
	Somewhat	6	22
	A great deal	3	11
	Not applicable	1	4
How helpful have you found the guidance in the National Curriculum? [grouped ratings]	Not at all helpful	17	63
	Somewhat	8	30
	Very helpful	1	4
	Not applicable	1	4

(*Continued.*)

Table 5. (*Continued.*)

Management of/pedagogical approach to home-education		*n*	%
Are there any other guidelines or curricula that you follow and find useful?	Yes	10	37
	No	17	63
To what extent does your provision of home-education differ from education provided in school(s)? [grouped ratings]	A great deal	27	100
	Somewhat	0	0
	Not at all	0	0

did not think this would change in the future. The overall picture for the level of planning of lessons and activities was slightly different; for past, present and (hypothetical) future, the modal response was in the mid-range, with a high level of planning being favoured by a minority and a very low level of planning preferred by just under a third of the group. In other words, the main approach taken by parents was to incorporate some planning of materials, sessions and activities within which children's preferences could be accommodated. This was reinforced in open comments following the rating questions:

> He is autonomous and self-determined, however I provide various learning experiences (trips, ideas, books, CDs, discussions etc) that are consciously planned in my own mind.

In terms of following structured guidelines or curricula, a majority did not follow the National Curriculum, nor feel any of the guidance contained therein helpful. A similar proportion did not follow (or find helpful) any other guidelines or curricula but a minority said they did. In open comments, 25 parents provided further details about the kinds of activities or topics covered in an average day or week. Descriptions were remarkably similar with many mentioning a range of specific subjects like Mathematics, English, Science, History, and Geography alongside other activities like cookery, music, languages, field trips, arts and crafts, exercise and social/life skills. All 27 parents provided a five or six rating (the highest) when asked about the extent to which their provision of education at home differed from education provided in school.

Feelings about home-education

All 27 parents gave the highest possible positive ratings to their feelings about home-education at the current time and their hypothesised feelings about home-education in the future (Table 6). A small number felt negative towards home-education in the past. In open comments parents suggested this was because they felt forced into it, or doubtful of their own capabilities and confidence, however they had changed their views over time, for example:

> Regrettably, we would never have considered home ed until forced into it because of bullying. We now wish that we had always home educated her.

All respondents said their children who were being educated at home also felt very positive about these experiences and a majority said they would be very unlikely to reconsider their decision to home-educate in the future. However, a minority thought they might reconsider; two parents said this would be triggered by the child's

Table 6. Feelings about home-education.

Feelings about home-education		*n*	%
How positive or negative do you feel about your experience/ provision of home-education in the past, present and future [for the future try to think about what is most likely]? [grouped ratings]	*Past:*		
	Negative	2	7.5
	OK	2	7.5
	Positive	23	85
	Present:		
	Negative	0	0
	OK	0	0
	Positive	27	100
	Future:		
	Negative	0	0
	OK	0	0
	Positive	26	96
	Not applicable	1	4
How do you think your child feels about their experience of home-education in the past, present and future? [grouped ratings]	*Past:*		
	Negative	0	0
	OK	1	4
	Positive	26	96
	Present:		
	Negative	0	0
	OK	0	0
	Positive	27	100
	Future:		
	Negative	0	0
	OK	0	0
	Positive	25	93
	Not applicable	2	7
How likely are you to reconsider your decision to home-educate in the future? [grouped ratings]	Not at all likely	22	82
	Maybe	2	7
	Very likely	3	11

decision and two said this was something they would like for their child. In open comments about what education for their child would be like in an 'ideal world', only seven parents explicitly mentioned home-education and most of these also said there would need to be some state funding and recognition. Ten parents mentioned child-focused educational approaches without explicitly mentioning home-education, and many of these made reference to schools/teachers, for example:

> A cheerful, lively provision with non-verbal teaching. High expectations and high achievement. I don't care if it's called mainstream or special. Good teaching with a commitment to learning.

Two parents said they would like specialist provision or an environment 'like a special school' and five preferred a flexible portfolio of provision, including home-education

and access to some classes/activities in schools, that could be tailored to suit individual needs, for example:

> Like it is now. One to one based around the child's specific needs. But with the capacity for the child to dip in and out of structured lessons when they are ready to do so.

Limitations

This survey was not intended to reach a large number of respondents or make an attempt at representative sampling. Its purpose was to obtain the views of some parents who were educating their children with SEN or disabilities at home. By using an online survey the sample was confined to those who were computer literate, had access to a computer at home or at work, and were in contact with, or aware of, specific support groups and/or websites dealing with home-education. Respondents from these contexts were self-selected and findings may therefore over-represent those with particularly strong views about/unusual experiences with educational provision. Online surveys are also necessarily constraining in terms of exploring views in more depth; in-depth semi-structured interviews could usefully augment such approaches in the future.

Discussion

Despite these limitations, this online survey gathered some rich and interesting information from (mostly) mothers educating children with SEN or disabilities at home. Just over half did not have a university education suggesting this was not a sample dominated by highly educated parents (cf. Rothermel 2003). A minority said they had never sent their children to school, suggesting home-education was a planned lifestyle choice for them. However, a majority (two-thirds) identified 'push' factors away from school as the main reasons for home-educating their children, in agreement with Arora (2006) in the UK and Reilly, Chapman, and O'Donoghue (2002) in Western Australia. These factors included bad experiences with formal provision and the perceived failure of schools to meet their child's needs adequately. Some parents suggested that the situation at school had become so bad that they feared for their children's mental health. These parents felt they had no alternative but to withdraw their children from school and, noticeably, despite substantial strains on financial, personal and family resources, continued with home-education as their perceived best (and only) available option.

Most parents were not against the idea of school *per se* but were more concerned with the individual needs of their children and the *ways* in which teaching and learning were approached in schools. Most parents had, unconsciously or otherwise, incorporated a range of National Curriculum subjects into their home-education provision, so there seemed to be little disagreement with schools about the subjects that should be taught. The main area of difference concerned *how* children were taught, with parents preferring a more child-centred, flexible and personalised approach; something that they perceived as only being available to their children by withdrawing them from school and educating them at home. In agreement with Arora (2006), most of the parents (implicitly or explicitly) suggested they would prefer their children to attend school but only if their needs were adequately met and learning suitably individualised. There was also some suggestion that provision needed to be sufficiently flexible

to accommodate children's changing needs over time, for example, through offering a mix of school and home-based provision. This was echoed in the findings of our research on the experiences of disabled children and their families more generally (Lewis, Parsons, and Robertson 2007b).

Hopwood et al. (2007) suggested there was no link between the parents' decision to withdraw their child from school as a result of SEN not being met and type of school (there was no information about this in Arora's 2006 research). However, a majority of children in the present study had been at mainstream school when the decision to home-educate them was made. Given the difficulties already noted with accessing a representative sample it is not possible to know for sure which scenario is more likely; this may be a reflection of particular groups of parents having a greater online presence then others and so more likely to see and complete the present survey. However, other research suggests that type of educational placement does influence parental satisfaction. Specifically, parents of children in special schools were significantly more satisfied with educational provision than those with children in mainstream contexts (Lewis et al. 2006, 2007a; Lewis, Parsons, and Robertson 2007b).

The specific nature of a child's special needs or disability could also influence views and experiences. Almost half of the group said their child had an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), making this the most commonly reported disability in the sample. Ten of these had also been in mainstream provision at the time of the decision to home-educate and none mentioned that this had been autism-specific provision. Two reports from the National Autistic Society (NAS) in the UK (Barnard, Prior, and Potter 2000; Batten et al. 2006) found that parental satisfaction of educational provision was highest when children were in autism-specific provision (either a specialist autism school or unit within a mainstream school) rather than general mainstream or special schools. The House of Commons Select Committee report on SEN in England (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006) also identified children with ASD as a group whose specific educational needs warrant particular attention. It could be that children with ASD are more likely than other children to be withdrawn from school to be educated at home because of the particular challenges they face.

However, other evidence – based on a wide range of satisfaction measures – suggests that the views of parents of children with ASD may be more positive (Whitaker 2007) and more similar to parents of children with other kinds of disabilities (Parsons, Lewis, and Ellins 2009; Parsons et al. forthcoming; Starr et al. 2006) than suggested by parent organisations. The main difference, then, may be one of engagement in wider policy debates rather than substantive variations in educational provision. In other words, some parents may be better placed to influence public perception and government policy than others and, by doing so, exercise their rights as 'consumers' of educational provision. At one level, the decision to home-educate could be interpreted as the ultimate in exercising consumer choice; signalling a rejection of the standard available options in favour of something more desirable and fit for purpose. However, one difficulty with a consumer driven ethos in educational provision is the inequity it can create by some parents (well-educated and articulate) being able to exercise their right to choose through engaging with the process and others (often from more deprived backgrounds) not willing or able to do so (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006; Knill and Humphreys 1996; Riddell, Brown, and Duffield 1994; Riddell et al. 2002).

A second difficulty lies in the assumption that deciding where and how to educate children, especially those with SEN or disabilities, is a real choice for parents. At least

for the majority of parents in our study the 'choice' was not a real one and so their role as an empowered consumer a myth. Decisions about educational provision had been reached only after periods of substantial unhappiness and with significant personal, familial and financial sacrifices. It is important to note that the government's Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCSF; formerly the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)) refers to home-education as 'elective' home-education (DCSF 2007). We have deliberately avoided using this term out of respect for our participants; 'elective' implies a positive and informed choice and, whilst this may have been the case for a minority, it is clearly inappropriate for most. Therefore, where does this leave our home-educating parents now and in the future?

The DCSF (2007) and the Scottish Government (2007) have published a set of guidelines about home-education and how to manage relationships between LAs with home-educating parents. This suggests that parents' right to choose home-education for their children is being taken seriously by UK governments and properly recognised as a legitimate option. Encouragingly, the guidelines provide some positive messages for home-educators. In particular, there is an onus on LAs to establish effective 'relationships that are rooted in mutual understanding, trust and respect' (DCSF 2007, para 4.1, 13). This includes having accessible information for parents about rights and responsibilities as well as a key contact person within the LA with specific responsibility for home-education. Improving relationships between families and LAs is clearly important; parents in the present study cited LAs and other professionals as the least supportive in providing information and advice (home-education groups were the most supportive) and wished for more positive collaboration.

However, for parents who feel forced into home-education through the perceived limitations of the state sector the guidelines may be of limited benefit. Arguably, the Government's wider vision for teaching and learning over the next decade – the 'personalisation' agenda – may have more to offer (DfES 2006). The personalisation of learning and teaching aims for a learner-centred curriculum that can be delivered flexibly and is based on individual needs and targets. It is defined as:

> taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child's and young person's learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate. It means strengthening the link between learning and teaching by engaging pupils – and their parents – as partners in learning. (DfES 2006, 6)

All the parents in the present study wished for a more sensitive approach in supporting their children, through recognising their individual needs and shaping provision accordingly. It could be that developments in educational provision in line with the personalisation agenda will deliver the sort of system that families required but found lacking. Rather worryingly, however, children with SEN receive only scant mention in the document and only then in a context where the mechanisms for developing individual support and a 'shared view of learning goals' (39) are already assumed to be in place. Strong concerns about this assumption are also raised in the House of Commons review of SEN provision (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006) which argues that the personalisation agenda is focused on raising standards (through achieving formal attainments and targets) and this sits 'very uncomfortably' (vol. 1, para 282, 66) with adequately meeting the needs of all children with SEN.

The Committee's recommendation is that SEN, not standards, should be at the heart of the personalisation agenda if the government is truly committed to providing

a suitable, equitable and appropriate education for all children and young people. It remains to be seen how this tension is played out in practice and whether children will continue to fall through the cracks of the formal education system as our families suggest here. Further, in this context, Hartley (2007) warns that the personalisation agenda is, less cosily, located strongly within a discourse reflecting economic theory. In this, personalisation encompasses an implicit view of parents as co-producers and home-educating parents may be seen as a particularly sharp illustration of his point.

Finally, the importance of seeking children's views directly cannot be overestimated and this is especially true for disabled children who tend not to be regularly or routinely included in discussions or decisions affecting their lives (Lewis and Porter 2004). Legislation in the UK requires disabled children to be involved in discussions, consultations and reviews about educational, and other forms of, provision (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, Disability Discrimination Act 1995). The voices of disabled children were noticeably missing from the present research, and remain largely absent from the research literature on home-education. This is clearly an important, and essential, avenue for future research.

Overall, this study has highlighted home-education for children with SEN as an overlooked aspect of educational provision. For these parents, the only way to help their children achieve their potential was to remove them from the state system altogether, often after serious concerns about their children's health and happiness. Whilst for some this decision was a positive and informed 'consumer' choice, for many it was a forced decision based on substantial frustration and concern. The true extent of disaffection with state schooling is unlikely ever to be known and some may argue that the views reported here represent a small minority of parents. These are, however, the lived experiences of real families and their views are important. They underline the challenges faced by many parents of children with SEN every day in trying to meet their children's needs; we hope that by giving voice to their experiences, policy makers are similarly challenged to provide equitable access to an appropriate education for all.

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Notes

1. SEN is defined as 'learning difficulties or disabilities which make it harder for children to learn or access education than most other children of the same age' (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001).
2. Disability is defined as 'a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial (lasting more than a year) adverse effect on the ability to carry out day-to-day activities' (Disability Discrimination Act 1995).
3. Thus, SEN and disability have overlapping but different meanings (Keil, Miller, and Cobb 2006). We use 'SEN' throughout as a shorthand term for the wider group encompassing disability.
4. A Statement of SEN (in England and Wales) is a legal document describing the child's needs and the provision needed to meet those needs, issued following a formal assessment

and reviewed on an annual basis. In Scotland this was called a Record of Needs but has now been replaced by a Co-ordinated Support Plan following the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act 2005.

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