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## **‘We can’t make him fit into the system’: parental reflections on the reasons why home education is the only option for their child who has special educational needs**

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This small-scale study investigates the perspectives of parents whose children have special educational needs/disabilities and who have elected to withdraw their children from the state-maintained education system in England and educate them at home. The study draws on data gathered from seven parents and their perspectives of home education following a government-commissioned review of home education in 2009, subsequently known as the ‘Badman Report’. The former New Labour government commissioned this review to assess the merits of the system of supporting and monitoring home education in England. Findings identified a number of issues, including the lack of understanding by staff within school settings around the issues of special needs and particularly in the area of autistic spectrum disorders, the failure to engage in partnership with parents and the impact that the school environment had upon the children.

**Keywords:** home education; autistic spectrum disorders (ASD); special needs; Badman Report; parental perspectives

### **Introduction**

The Badman Report published in June 2009 was commissioned by the former New Labour government to assess home education in England. The review was conducted by a former Director of Children’s Services for Kent County Council, UK, Graham Badman, who acknowledged that the needs of children with special needs were not being met adequately within schools, resulting in some parents withdrawing their children from the school system. The Badman Report (2009, 24) stated:

Many parents whose children have needs as diverse as dyslexia and autism, withdrew their child often in despair that their needs were not being adequately met in school. In such instances, it is often a case of ‘home education by default’ rather than ‘elective home education’.

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### **Review of home education**

This research builds upon the work of authors such as Arora (2006) and Parsons and Lewis (2010) and discusses the experiences of parents who have children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities/special needs, and who have felt that they have no choice but to withdraw their children from the school system.

Within the UK (England and Wales, with some variation for Scotland), parents do not legally have to educate their children within a school setting. Section 7 of the Education Act 1996 requires that the parent of every child of compulsory school age should ensure that the child receives efficient full-time education suitable to the age, ability and aptitude of the child, taking into consideration any SEN that child may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise (Monk 2004; Arora 2006). Parents are required to ensure their children are provided with a suitable education. However, the term 'otherwise' allows for this education to be in places other than the school setting, including the home; although Monk (2004) suggests that this can also apply to settings such as hospitals, referral units and also home tuition provided by the local authority (LA). In addition, there is no requirement for parents who home educate to follow the National Curriculum (Rothermel 2003); Monk (2004) contends some parents opt for home education specifically to avoid the national curriculum.

### **International context**

Arora (2006) acknowledges that the acceptance of home education will vary in different countries. In Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Greece, there is compulsory school attendance, and home education is not allowed by law (Taylor and Petrie 2000) although is permitted under certain conditions and some exceptions are made (Blok and Karsten 2011). Home education has often taken a different trajectory in different countries (Forrester and Taylor 2011) and Austria now permits home education although it has not always done so (Taylor and Petrie 2000) and Sweden makes it difficult for parents to home educate (Villalba 2009). In countries such as Canada, the USA, the UK and Australia, home education has been accommodated as an alternative form of education provision and its popularity has grown (Thomas and Lowe 2002).

### **Home education within the UK**

At present, parents are not required to inform their LA, or any other body, that they are home educating their child unless that child is to be removed from a special school setting. As a consequence of non-registration, there is only an estimation of the number of children who are home educated in the UK (Morton 2010). In 2006, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned a feasibility study into the prevalence of home education in England. The findings of this study by Hopwood et al. (2007), supported by Arora (2006), suggest that there is an increase in the number of children who are being home educated, and the numbers vary across LAs (Hopwood et al. 2007). However, because no one can be sure of the exact number of home-educated children, statistical evidence is inconsistent. The numbers quoted in the literature vary considerably and there is an estimation that numbers lie between 45,250 and 150,000. According to the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (2010), the lack of the requirement to inform the LA makes it more difficult for them to identify home-educated children

within their area and ascertaining whether they are receiving an education that is deemed 'suitable' and 'efficient' as required under the 1944 Education Act.

### **Home education and SEN**

It is unknown how many home-educated children have SEN. However, the findings of Hopwood et al. (2007) suggest that 5% of the home-educated children in their sample had a statement of SEN in comparison with 2.9% nationally. This is not an accurate number due to the fact that there are many children with SEN who do not have a statement of needs. The DfES reported that in 2004 there were 1070 children with statements who were educated outside of the school settings. Parsons and Lewis (2010) acknowledge that these figures are based on families who are known to LAs and do not include children with SEN who do not have statements.

### ***Why parents home educate***

The motivations for parents to home educate are varied as discussed by Arora (2006), Rothermel (2003) and Parsons and Lewis (2010). Arora (2006, 57) suggests that these motivations can be because of 'moral, religious or ideological convictions'. Morton (2010) identifies three specific groupings of home educators, with the third group viewing home education as a 'last resort' often due to the bullying of the child at school who may or may not have SEN. Similarly studies by Parsons and Lewis (2010), Arora (2006), Hopwood et al. (2007) and Gibson and Kendall (2010) identify similar themes of the settings failure in meeting the needs (educational and otherwise) of the children who have special needs and/or disabilities. As Rose and Howley (2007) acknowledge, even teachers who are seen as effective still have difficulties at times in managing pupils with SEN. The two groups of children with needs that are considered to be most challenging to teachers are those children who have behavioural issues (Evans and Lunt 2002) and children on the autistic spectrum (Emam and Farrell 2009). This lack of understanding of the condition is discussed by Parsons, Lewis, and Ellins (2009, 38) who acknowledge that this 'makes it disproportionately difficult for parents of children with ASD to find appropriate and supportive educational provision for their children compared with families who have children with other disabilities'. Tobias (2009) acknowledges that the possession of basic knowledge of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and an understanding of the key characteristics of the condition in terms of social, emotional and communication difficulties are more likely to ensure a more positive experience for children and young people within educational settings. Gibson and Kendall (2010) suggest that there is a need for continuing professional development in teacher education that specifically relates to inclusion and meeting the needs of all learners; this is also supported by Ellis and Tod (2014) and Webster and Blatchford (2014) who have identified a similar need for teachers to be given more training on supporting pupils with SEN and, perhaps more importantly, their research has also highlighted that there is inadequate coverage of SEN within initial teacher training. Symes and Humphrey (2011) emphasise the importance of appropriate training within the area of SEN for teaching assistants (TAs) who often work alongside children who have a range of needs, although Tissot (2013) suggests that there are also other issues in terms of the training (in service or pre service) that teachers receive around working with and supporting teaching assistants. Findings from the large-scale five-year project 'The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff' (DISS) (Blatchford et al. 2009) acknowledge that the

majority of teachers had not had training to help them work with support staff in classrooms.

In order to fully support children with special needs/disabilities, there needs to be a partnership between parents and the school. Plimley, Bowen, and Morgan (2007) discuss the importance of partnership with parents and suggest that listening to each other and acknowledging the fact that both parent and practitioner have expertise, experience and knowledge lead to an effective partnership. One of the fundamental principles of the new revised Code of Practice 2014 (DfE 2014) is the important role that parents have in supporting their child's education and emphasises the importance of partnership between parents and schools in enabling children with SEN to reach their potential, which Briggs had asserted in 2005 (Briggs 2005). Tobias (2009) and Tissot (2011) also emphasise the need for good communication between settings and parents. However, Todd (2007, 79) suggests that if partnership means 'an equal and reciprocal relationship' then in terms of education, there is limited progress with this aim.

Whilst there are studies carried out on the experiences of home educators who have children with SEN and disabilities in other countries (Kidd and Kaczmarek 2010), there are few studies within the UK that relate specifically to the home education of children with SEN or disabilities. However, the research undertaken by Arora (2006) and Parsons and Lewis (2010) clearly identifies the motivations for choosing home education, but as Parsons and Lewis (2010, 68) make clear, 'this is an under reported and little researched area'.

This research sets out to improve understanding of reasons why parents who had a child with a disability made the decision to home educate their children rather than continue schooling within the education system.

## **Methodology**

As mentioned, the population of home educators is largely unknown since no reliable lists or statistics exist relating to home-educated children (including those with SEN). It is difficult therefore to ascertain whether the participants in the study are representative of their population. It is also recognised that the participants who are self-selected may have strong views on the subject of home education and, again, may not represent the opinions of all home educators. However, although this is a small-scale study, the interviews are a rich source of data, focusing in detail on the experiences of the parents.

## **Sample**

The research was carried out through the summer of 2010 and data were gathered by means of semi-structured telephone interviews. The sample of home educators comprised seven women, all of whom were mothers. Some had professional qualifications; and prior to full-time home educating, four had worked within the fields of psychology, social work, accountancy and teaching; one mother had studied neurosciences at university. The occupations of two parents prior to home educating are unknown. There is no further background data on the parents in terms of age or socioeconomic grouping. They were main carers and were solely responsible for educating their children at home. Six of the mothers had sons on the autistic spectrum.

Table 1 shows the duration that they had been home educating which ranged from one to ten years, the nature of the children's additional needs and the ages of the home-educated children which ranged from six to fifteen years.

Table 1. Information about the participants.

Participant (all mothers)	Number of children with additional needs	Age of child/ children and gender	Medical diagnosis	Period of time home educating
Parent A	1	6 years, male	Dyspraxia/hyper mobility food intolerances	1 year
Parent B	1	12 years, male	Autism/learning disabilities	3 years
Parent C	1	14 years 2 months, male	Asperger's syndrome/ hyper mobility	10 years
Parent D	2	14 years, male 12 years, male	First child: Asperger's syndrome Second child: severe dyslexia/attention deficit disorder	Home educates both children 2 years, 6 months
Parent E	1	9 years, male	Asperger's syndrome/ hyper mobility	1 year
Parent F	1	10 years, male	Asperger's syndrome	2 years
Parent G	1	9 years, male	Asperger's syndrome	1 year

Six of the home-educated children were diagnosed with ASD and three of whom had co-morbidity of disorders. One child was diagnosed with dyspraxia, hypermobility and food allergies and one with dyslexia. Only two of the children from the study had a statement of SEN. All of the parents reported that they had considered or tried a range of educational provision for their children including Montessori, private and public education, specialist provision and mainstream provision, and a specialist unit attached to a mainstream school. None of the parents had used or were using the Lovaas method which is an early intensive behaviour therapy programme that can be used by parents who have children with autism and other related disorders (Rivera 2008).

### **Research approach**

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate for the research questions posed, as it provides the opportunity to focus upon subjective experiences of parents who had chosen to home educate. Questions were constructed around three broad areas of inquiry; why parents made the decision to home educate, the attitudes of staff within the school setting and the impact that schooling had upon the child.

Parsons and Lewis (2010) and Arora (2006) acknowledge that home educators as a social group are particularly hard to reach and research possibilities depend on the co-operation of the volunteers. The internet, however, offers new opportunities for researching groups that have been traditionally difficult to access (Mann and Stewart 2000; Parsons and Lewis 2010).

Following ethical approval, which incorporated ethical guidelines from the British Educational Research Association, participants for this study were identified in the first instance via an online support forum for home education and SEN. One of the researchers of this study knew a member of the home education support forum who, following discussion around the purpose of the study, acted as 'Gatekeeper' to the forum. Creswell (2003) stresses the importance of securing permission from those who are termed 'gatekeepers', who are seen as people who can control access for researchers and also access to their target audience (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007).

The 'gatekeeper' introduced information from the researchers to the members of the online home educating parent forum, stating their interest in home education, who they were and the nature of their research, and invited participation. Parents who were willing to be interviewed via telephone about their experiences of home educating their children were invited to respond to the researchers via the university email. Initially four parents responded and following a subsequent reminder from the 'gatekeeper' three other parents replied, in total seven female respondents. Whilst there are fathers who have responsibility for home education (Parsons and Lewis 2010), Morton (2010, 46) suggests that 'home education appears to be predominantly a project of motherhood'.

Consent forms, ethics forms and information sheets were subsequently sent via email attachment to willing participants. When the forms were returned, a suitable time was arranged for a telephone interview. Telephone interviews were utilised for a number of reasons: The participants were located in different areas of England and as Bryman (2004) acknowledges it can be costly for interviewers in terms of time and money to travel between respondents who are geographically dispersed. As the participants were home educating their children, it was more convenient for them to be interviewed via the telephone and certainly offered greater flexibility than face to face interviews as discussed by Cachia and Millward (2011) who also argue that telephone interviews are a valid way of collecting qualitative data. All of the parents who were interviewed made the interviewers aware at the very start of the conversation that it may be necessary for them to end the call abruptly at any time during the interview and to re-arrange another call and this was dependent upon what their child was doing at any given time (five of the participants did move around their home during the interviews ensuring that their child was in constant view). As Holt (2010) identifies, the telephone interview gives greater control to the participants.

Robson (2002) suggests that when conducting telephone interviews, rapport may be difficult to achieve, a view contested in research by Holt (2010) and Trier-Bieniek (2012) who acknowledge that rapport cannot be guaranteed even in a face to face interview. However, the researchers considered that there was a rapport built between themselves and the participants, perhaps because of the shared interest in home educating; this was evidenced by comments made by participants and their willingness to be contacted again if required.

The interviews covered areas such as the reasons why the parent decided to home educate, the experiences of the child within the school setting and how the child's condition impacts upon them, particularly in relation to education. The semi-structured interview followed a framework of predetermined key questions. The researchers were able to ask follow up questions to responses given by the interviewees and to clarify responses that were ambiguous. The semi-structured format gave more depth and personal qualities to the responses.

Respondents were given an approximate time scale for the interviews and were informed that the interview should take between forty minutes to one hour. In reality, the interviews lasted for at least one hour to one-and-a-half hours and one respondent used a two-hour slot. The parents were only interviewed once and all were assured of anonymity.

At the start of each interview, the respondents were asked if they had any questions about the research. The respondents were also informed that they did not have to reply to any question that they felt uncomfortable with and could terminate the interview whenever they wanted to (Silverman 2006). The respondents were also made aware that with their permission, the interviews would be recorded using a recording lead attached to a digital tape recorder. Once the interviews were finished, the recordings were fully transcribed. Respondents were offered a copy of their transcript which they could check for accuracy. Two accepted and requested that they be sent electronically but did not choose



to make any amendments. Four of the respondents have asked for a copy of the final paper to be sent to them electronically.

## Findings

The interviews elicited evidence in three areas: first, the motivations and reasons why parents made the decision to withdraw their children from the state-maintained education system; second, the attitudes of staff within the settings and third, the impact that attending school had upon the child.

### *Theme 1: Motivations and Reasons*

It was clear that the decision to home educate by parents was because they believed that the social and emotional needs and SEN requirements of the child were not being met in mainstream schooling and/or a unit for children with ASD attached to a mainstream school. Also, the negative experiences that the children had at school had contributed considerably to the decision to home educate as supported by Parsons and Lewis (2010) and Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010). Rogers (2007) suggests that parents who have children with special needs have an expectation that their child will be accepted and included within the mainstream school environment and acknowledges that in reality this rarely happens.

The seven participants within this study did not elect to home educate their child but felt that for a number of reasons they had no other choice, as the following comments show and it was a case of home education by default, as highlighted within the Badman Report (2009).

He's got into such a bad stress phobia kind of state about school, he had a nervous breakdown ... we said, look this is not working, it's not going to work, we can't make him fit into the system, so we're going to have to look into home education.

Parent D

I really wanted him to stay in mainstream where he was but what do you do when you can see that the teachers and head really dislike your child – do you fight them to let him stay?

Parent B

In contrast to Parsons and Lewis (2010), all of the parents stated that they were not averse to their child returning to school education at some point in the future if that was what the child wanted. Some parents said that they would welcome flexi-schooling with part-time attendance at school but they identified the difficulties that they had due to flexi-schooling being at the discretion of a head teacher. Their identified need for a more flexible approach to formal education echoes those presented by Arora (2006), Parsons and Lewis (2010), Badman (2009) and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (2010).

I had planned to try to flexi-schooling but it's so difficult to set up. It's hard to find a head teacher that will do it to be honest. I'm not sure why because they would get full time funding for a part time place.

Parent A

### *Theme 2: Attitudes of staff and lack of partnership*

Six of the children in the study had a main diagnosis of autism or Asperger's syndrome with co-morbidity of disorders. Parent A had a child with dyspraxia, hypermobility and food



intolerances who was unable to cope with a full week in school and Parent D had one child who was severely dyslexic and who was being home educated alongside his brother who had ASD. The parents in this study felt that there was a lack of understanding about ASD by the staff and an unwillingness to listen to the parents when they wished to provide information on the best way to support and work with their child. Research by Tissot (2011) acknowledges that there are tensions between parents and professional educators in terms of partnership; this lack of ‘partnership’ has been experienced by the parents within this study and evidenced by the excerpt below.

Parent B went to discuss her son with his new class teacher:

I said, my son is very easy if you just listen to him, but if you basically become critical and don’t listen to him, all you have to do is just spend those few seconds to listen.

According to Parent B, the teacher’s response was

I have been teaching for forty odd years. I know what I’m doing and he will do what I want.’  
‘I said, fine then, there is no point in calling me in to talk about him because you do not want to hear what I have to say about how to manage him.

Certainly the study by Emam and Farrell (2009) indicates that although teachers do face difficulties in managing the needs of pupils with ASD, there was often unwillingness on the part of a majority of teachers to put in the extra effort in order to address their needs.

The child of parent B had an outreach worker who would come into the school, initially every fortnight but this reduced to every half term. She would set the numeracy and literacy work that was then delivered by the teaching assistant. The child did not take part in any other activity within the classroom when he had completed the set work that usually took him half an hour to complete.

What they said was that it was too difficult for the teachers to adapt the lessons to his needs and the teaching assistant wasn’t able to, so he didn’t take part in them ... He used to stand at the end of a desk and sift counters endlessly because his actual work would have taken him, I don’t know, half an hour a day, so he would stand there sifting counters ... he didn’t take part in the other class activities.

Parent B

The new revised Code of Practice (2014) reiterates that children, including those with SEN, have a right to a broad, balanced and relevant education. However, the parents who had children with ASD in this study expressed their concerns that their children were not receiving an appropriate education. This is a familiar finding within other studies, where it was felt by participants that teachers and other educators had limited understanding of the difficulties associated with children with ASD and this therefore led to a lack of strategies that are appropriate to ensure a positive experience within the setting (Kidd and Kaczmarek 2010). Research by Symes and Humphrey (2011), however, acknowledges that in order to support children with ASD in terms of inclusive practice, a few strategies will not work with every learner but there are some general principles that have been proven to be effective. The parents in this study felt that there had been little or no attempt to develop strategies to support their children within the settings not only in terms of educational progress but also social development. However, the Children and Families Act (2014) places greater emphasis on child and parental involvement in ensuring that the SEN of the child are being met.

When one parent went to discuss the lack of suitable and efficient educational provision for her child, she was informed by the head teacher:

Teachers are not trained to deal with children like your son, we just can't do it and there was no, we can't do it therefore we are going to have to learn, it was, we can't do it full stop.

It was felt by the participants that the schools did not really want to include their children and showed an unwillingness to support the parents and the child.

Parents expressed their distress at the comments made by the class teachers and head teachers.

He (the head teacher) came to see my son at his school and he was very hurtful. In his opinion my son could not be educated in a mainstream setting. My son was using PECS (picture exchange communication system) and he (the head teacher) said to me ... he is too disruptive, he wafts these pieces of paper in your face and I am like, oh no! ... Well, the ironic thing is that they had all sorts of awards for being an inclusive school!

Parent B

I didn't want him to go to a unit but it was crystal clear that they didn't want him. I was really hurt by that ... he was a gorgeous, clever, funny boy. He had made a number of friends, saw them out of school and was always invited to parties but the school kept saying that he had no friends and that parents had complained ... it made me feel like a social outcast.

Parent E

Parent B had identified that the head teacher had tried to support her child and recognised that the classroom was larger than average and noisy so she moved the class into another room which had a small room attached, enabling the child to go into the small classroom whenever he wanted to, this worked well. However, the head teacher retired and the new head teacher who was not as accommodating and decided that the room would be better used as a staff room, thus removing the facility for the child.

The importance of the environment within school settings is well documented and certainly the use of quiet, calm places help to reduce the anxiety experienced by children with ASD and children who have other difficulties (Tobias 2009).

All schools have a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) and part of that role is working not only with children and staff members but also with families. Cowne (2003) suggests that in order for a parent partnership to develop, the SENCo is required to listen to any concerns that a parent may have about their child or the progress that the child may or may not be making. Cowne (2003, 77) emphasises the need for the SENCo to 'learn to listen to and value the parents' expertise about their own child'. Tissot (2013) argues that the SENCo's main role is to be the advocate for students who need support in their learning, but this was not the experience of one of the parents in the study:

When he moved into year two he had the SENCo as his teacher ... I thought this would be great in terms of knowing how to support my son but she really didn't have a clue!. She did not attempt to meet his needs. She saw him as defiant and told me 'He won't break me you know, I'll break him'.

Parent E

Findings from the work of Emam and Farrell (2009) suggest that in order to support individuals with ASD, teachers rely heavily upon the use of TAs who are perceived as being more positive about working with children with ASD as opposed to the teacher who is

more inclined to be anxious about supporting children with ASD within the classroom. Furthermore, the study also showed that the TAs viewed their role as one of supporting in academic activities and removing barriers to the learning of that individual. Contrary to previous studies on the role of the TA, Emam and Farrell (2009) found that teachers relied heavily upon the TA, consulting them about the pupils they supported and the inference was that the TA had the expertise about ASD not the teacher, the consequences being that ‘the existence of the TA implicitly meant to teachers that the pupil was not within their range of responsibilities’. Findings from the DISS project (Blatchford et al. 2009) identified that the vast majority of TAs worked within class supporting pupils with SEN and also groups of lower attaining pupils. However, recommendations from the DISS report suggest that support staff should not routinely support lower attaining pupils and pupils with SEN, but these specific groups of pupils should in fact have more of the teachers’ time and input, which is supported by Webster and Blatchford (2014) who suggest that it is the TA who should work with the majority of the class for certain periods of time and the teacher should work with the children with SEN.

The following comments from the parents support these findings and emphasise the need for adequate training for all involved in working with children with ASD.

As soon as they got the support of the TA it was an excuse to get him out of the classroom ... she had not trained in ASD and would take him into the corridor. He was really bright but was spending most of his time informally excluded.

Parent D

He had a teaching assistant for about three months. In that time, she filled three A4 books about him ... I requested to read them and they were so subjective. I could see where the trigger points were such as transitions and the hall/PE, eating in the hall etc but they wouldn’t listen ... Each night she would bring him out to me and he hated it – I did too. She would say things like ‘he’s been to the toilet four times today’! She never said anything positive about him.

Parent E

It is common for children with ASD to have difficulties with the sensory systems and certainly hyper-responsiveness to external stimuli, which can include certain textures, foods, smells, labels, difficulty in standing in line because they are close to other people new clothes, and messy play, such as playing with sand, clay or water, and an oversensitive/aversion to food textures is common (olfactory stimuli). Exposure to these stimuli can result in the child becoming anxious or distressed resulting in the child acting emotionally or aggressively (Hilton et al. 2010). One of the parents acknowledged that her child had difficulties in this area and this had an impact upon him within the classroom in terms of his attention and behaviours. Although a sensory assessment was carried out, the school did not act upon the recommendations that would support him.

He has a lot of sensory issues. Background noise disturbs him, he can literally hear a pin drop and also he doesn’t like the feel of certain things like clothes, clay, glue etc. He had a sensory assessment at school and although they never took any notice of it I think it is insightful.

Parent F

Furthermore, Hilton et al. (2010) state that children with ASD have fewer food preferences and are less inclined to try differing types of food, especially soft foods (Warner 2006). However, the quote below clearly illustrates the lack of knowledge that staff have in terms of these issues and the possible unwillingness to consider other alternatives to the ‘problem’. For example if the child with ASD dislikes the smell of the hall where

lunches were consumed, they could be offered a different room in which to eat their meal; such small adjustments could assist in working towards inclusive practice.

He still wouldn't eat at all in school, he hated the smell of the hall and his eating became the thing I was called in for but he became much more withdrawn than before. He was really sad and didn't like being there at all (in school).

Parent E

### *Theme 3: Impact upon the child*

The parents interviewed felt that the school experience had negatively impacted upon the health and well-being of their child, citing anxiety and depression, findings similar to those of Humphrey and Lewis (2008) and Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010).

I feel incredibly bad about school because when he was at school he would get up in the morning and he would hide his school uniform. He would cry when I was dressing him, he would scream in the car ... At one point, he was banging his head so much, I was beside myself and they (the school) suggested that we get him one of those helmets that people who have epilepsy wear!

Parent B

Westling et al. (2010) discuss the use of seclusion within school settings and note that whilst this practice may reduce inappropriate and undesirable behaviours, there are also considerable disadvantages to be considered including the risk of the child self-harming in a variety of differing ways which is evidenced in the quote below. One of the mothers in the study discussed the experiences of her eight-year-old child when he attended a unit for children with ASD attached to a mainstream school.

My son was having outbursts daily and the consequence was to be locked in the calm down room on his own, the lock was on the top outside. He was often carried into the room. I found out later that he would spend days in that room each week. He began to pick at his eczema and the scabs formed big holes in his legs. He had big dark circles under his eyes – his health was bad and he just wasn't himself.

Parent E

The small 'calm down' room discussed above was formerly a store cupboard in the classroom with reinforced glass windows at the top which the mother herself found totally claustrophobic.

Several parents stated that on withdrawal from school, their children had to enter a period of 'de-schooling' due to the impact that school had on their child's health. Importantly, parents expressed that the emotional well-being of their child was vastly improved by their decision to home educate and they all reported that their children were happier, more confident and far less anxious. This reporting of improved well-being is supported by the research of Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010, 257) on Australian mothers home educating their children with ASD, who reported improvement in both 'behavioural and psychological well-being'.

Since he has been home, days and weeks go by without him shouting. We haven't taken away those feelings of anxiety and at times fear but he is learning to deal with them.

Now ... he is just so happy!

Parent B

As a consequence of home educating their children, the parents had to make sacrifices in terms of time and finances; however, all of the parents stated that the stress they themselves had experienced prior to home educating had lessened considerably and discussed a marked improvement in their own health and emotional well-being.

Since they've been at home, because they're not stressed and not having to go through what they were in school, they are getting on a whole lot better and life is so much less stressful because you are not having to fight every morning.

Parent D

### Conclusion and implications

This small-scale study has sought to identify some reasons why parents decide to home educate. It is not a decision that has been taken lightly, but the parents interviewed felt that they had no other choice with the decline of the health and well-being of their children being the deciding factor. Clearly there have been a number of issues identified within this study including the failure of schools to engage with parents, lack of knowledge and understanding around specific special needs and the impact of the school environment upon the child. It raises questions about the effectiveness of formal schooling provision particularly for children on the autistic spectrum. Contrary to other research, none of the parents identified bullying by other children as a factor in withdrawing their child from school, but attitudes towards the parents and children by staff was considered important. Parents perceived that there was unwillingness on the part of the staff to listen to them and this was seen as a contributory factor in the failure to develop a partnership which would benefit the children. This study highlights that effective communication is paramount and should be a priority for all professional educators.

It is evident that there was a lack of understanding about special needs and particularly in the area of ASD from all members of staff including head teachers. Training within this area was necessary for all staff, and particularly the TAs who worked alongside the children. It does not mean that each member of staff has to be an 'expert' in this area but basic knowledge is a requirement if children who have special needs are to be fully supported within a school environment. This study also highlights the need for more flexible provision to be offered to parents who choose to home educate. The Children and Families Act 2014 and the new revised Code of Practice 2014 will give parents more choice with regard to educational provision for their child who has SEN, including admission to state academies and free schools.

The responses from home educating parents was from a small sample so perhaps there is a need for caution, but the issues experienced by these parents are relevant to further investigation in this field of home educating parents.

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