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Through the lens of home-educated children: engagement in education

Tara Jones*

University of the West of Scotland, Ayr Campus, Ayr, UK

Engagement and participation are important for successful outcomes in education, yet disaffection in the UK, according to some exclusion and absence statistics, shows a growing trend. The purpose of this research was to develop a starting point for a theory of children's engagement in education using grounded theory method. Evidence from home-educating families suggests that disaffection is a problem that is unique to school education. The research investigated home educated children's perceptions and experiences of home education. A flexible, semi-structured, qualitative design, encouraging children to determine the structure of their narratives was employed, using photovoice. Analysis followed grounded theory method and the results highlight themes for future development, refinement and further investigation. Important findings are that perceptions of self, and flexible and supportive learning contexts that provide children with a sense of active and autonomous involvement are linked to learning engagement and enthusiasm for learning. The conclusion outlines reasons why educational psychologists should become involved in discussion and research relating to home education. Limitations of the research are discussed and issues for future research are considered.

Keywords: education; engagement; experiences; home education; photovoice; perceptions; educational psychology; disaffection

Introduction

An understanding of children's motivation for learning is crucial for encouraging their engagement and is therefore a significant factor to be taken into account when understanding the reasons for disaffection. Home education represents an alternative form of education to schooling that is little understood by mainstream educational professionals (Lees, 2011). Reports from home-educating families suggest that disaffection is not a problem when children are educated at home (Morton, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to explore home-educated children's perceptions and experiences of home education. Such an exploration may provide some insights that may be informative for professionals working in mainstream education, in particular, those who are concerned with the engaging of children who have become disaffected.

Significantly, research has found that the central reason for choosing to home educate in the UK is disaffection with the school system (Morton, 2008). Some parents choose to educate their children at home because they perceive their children's experiences at school to be unsatisfactory (Morton, 2008). Morton suggests that

*Email: tara.jones@uws.ac.uk

these home-educators explicitly choose home education due to their perception of school's negative psychological effects on their children, brought about through bullying, problems due to special educational needs or behaviour issues. This is supported by Arora (2006) who stated that the top three reasons given by parents for choosing home education were special educational needs not being met, bullying and school refusal. Winstanley (2009) suggested that home education was a last resort for parents of gifted and talented children who considered that their children's needs were not being met through mainstream schooling. Parents' concerns included issues relating to perceived lack of challenge, difficulties with socialisation which may force children to "dumb down" to fit in, curriculum issues, mismatches between values and beliefs and behaviour policies (Winstanley, 2009). Parents of gifted children, for example, consider the benefits of home-educating to include the ability of parents to provide a curriculum that is designed to suit the talents and skills of the child as well as allowing children to follow their natural interests and propensities (Winstanley, 2009).

The number of families in the UK who choose to educate their children at home is rising (Arora, 2003, 2006). It has been suggested that in 2000 approximately 1.5% of the UK school age population were home educated, with dramatic increases predicted (Arora, 2002). Recent investigations suggest that, even though the number of home-educated children remains small, some local authorities have reported a rise since 2002 (Hannam & Razzal, 2007). Despite common misconceptions often fuelled by isolated cases in the media, the consensus in the UK research literature is that home-educated children suffer no ill-effects, either psychologically or socially (Arora, 2003; Dowty, 2000; Ray 2000b; Rothermel, 2002; Webb, 1999). This has been supported by the government-funded review of home education carried out by Badman (2009) who set out to discover whether home education could be used as a cover for child abuse. The report found no conclusive evidence for this claim. Further, a growing body of research from the United States suggests that home-educated children are more likely to have higher academic achievement than their school counterparts despite no significant differences in parental educational status (Ray, 2000a). Those who advocate home education argue that successful outcomes are due to choice and consideration of the wishes and feelings of the child (Dowty, 2000; Meighan, 1995; Ray, 2000a; Thomas, 1998; Winstanley, 2009).

However, disagreements have arisen between home-education organisations, such as Education Otherwise, and the government with organisations lobbying parliament in response to some of the findings and conclusions from the Badman (2009) report which implied that home education does not necessarily provide a suitable, efficient or appropriate form of education for children. The problem, according to Lees (2011) is one of incommensurability due to lack of understanding by professionals about the ontological and epistemological perspectives of home education. It also appears that the definitions of "suitable" and "efficient" remain open to interpretation, despite being clarified by case law (see Gabb, 2005; Taylor & Petrie, 2000).

"Suitable" education, for example, is defined as education which prepares a child for life in modern civilised society, enables them to achieve their full potential and equips a child for life within the community without precluding different life choices in the future (Gabb, 2005; Taylor & Petrie, 2000). The definition of "efficient" is much less clear but seems to mean that the education achieves its intended outcomes (Taylor & Petrie, 2000). The difficulty is that such interpretations are

likely to be influenced by one's perception of child development, community and citizenship, and also one's pedagogical viewpoint.

Home-educators are not an homogenous group (Arora, 2003; Meighan, 1984; Rothermel, 2002; Thomas, 1998). Like professional educators they have different approaches and methods relating to teaching and learning. A major problem that limits the ability of education professionals to develop objective views and make informed decisions about home education is that very little research has been conducted on this issue in the UK. Another problem is that most research focuses on the perspectives of adults and thus presents a limited perspective. This highlights the need for further discussion and research into home-education practices and outcomes, particularly research that considers the issue from the perspective of young people who have experience of home education. Children can provide a rich source of information about processes and events that occur in their education (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). There are, however, issues relating to how one should listen to children and what kinds of knowledge children have (Tangen, 2008). There has been a prevailing view of children as citizens-in-waiting (Arnott, 2008; Cairns & Brannan, 2005; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000) and as such the views of children have often been sought within a framework determined or controlled by adults (Hill, 1997; Johnson, 2005; Mayall, 1999; Pole, Mizen, & Bolton, 1999; Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009) or, as noted by Shier (2010),

> The link has been made between participation and consultation … people think that if you have achieved consultation, then you've achieved participation … We go and talk to children … they tell us something, and then we go and carry on doing whatever it was that we were doing. (UK children's participation practitioner in Shier, 2010, p. 28)

This is not to suggest that what children say should be considered as the last word, since children's accounts are no more true than the accounts of adults (Nixon et al., 1996 in Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Nevertheless, providing a platform for children to be heard, which takes into account their position as stakeholders in their education, represents a commitment to their entry into their culture (Bruner, 1996) as well as recognising their right to participation. The aim of this research, therefore, was to develop an understanding of home education by looking at it through the eyes of home-educated children. The research was also intended to enable home-educated children to express their experiences and perceptions within a structure that welcomes their participation.

Method

Design

Photovoice is a research tool involving the use of photographs to stimulate responses and discussion. It enables researchers to access the beliefs, needs and world view of children as perceived and experienced through their eyes (Nelson & Christensen, 2009). Photovoice provides children with control over the data collection process and alters the power balance in the research process in favour of the children (Alderson, 2001; Johnson, 2005; Nelson and Christensen, 2009). Research shows that use of photographs increases memory recall in children (Aschermann, Dannenberg, & Schulz, 1998; Salmon, 2001). Photovoice has been used successfully as a vehicle for discussion with school-aged children about their experiences

of learning and learning environments (Johnson, 2005; Nelson & Christensen, 2009). Children are asked to take photographs of their experiences and use these as a vehicle for developing their perceptions, responses and/or narratives (Alderson, 2001; Johnson, 2005; Nelson and Christensen, 2009).

Ethical considerations

For the purposes of this research the criteria for participation were that children were aged between seven and 18 years and that they were capable of giving informed consent. Parents were also required to consent to their children's involvement prior to informed consent being sought from the children themselves. The children and young people were invited to participate in the research after being provided with an opportunity to read, or to be read, clearly stated information about the details and purpose of the study, and after being given the opportunity to discuss the implications with their parents. Written opt-in consent was gained from participants and their parents prior to their involvement. This information included a clear statement of their right to withdraw at any time and this was also reinforced verbally at the time of interview. Participants' identities were protected and they are referred to throughout using pseudonyms. Further, as direct analysis of the photographs was not a major element of this research, and to protect confidentiality, copies of the photographs are not included, although they are described in some detail. Photographs remain the property of the children and any copies, along with transcripts, were deleted once they were analysed.

Participants

Participants were children currently living in, and home-educated in, England. They were recruited through a snowball sample of home-educators. Nine children between seven and 14 years of age and recruited from six families took part in the research.

Profiles of participants

Annie is a 10-year old girl. Her brother Jovi is aged seven. Both siblings participated in the study. They have never been to school and both chose to provide verbal narratives to accompany their photographs. Charlotte is an eight-year old girl. Her brother Jonathon is aged 10. Both siblings participated in the study. Neither child has ever been to school and both chose to provide verbal narratives to accompany their photographs. Christopher is an 11-year old boy and was initially flexi-schooled (attended school part-time) before being recently withdrawn for full-time home education. Christopher chose to provide a verbally dictated written narrative to accompany his photographs in the form of captions. Christopher has autism. His informed consent was gained through the use of social stories, a method suggested by his parent as appropriate in supporting Christopher with his understanding of the research and making an informed decision. Hannah is a 10-year old girl and has never been to school. Hannah chose to provide a written narrative to accompany her photographs in the form of a powerpoint style presentation. Mia is a 14-year old girl and has never been to school. Mia chose to provide a verbal narrative to accompany her photographs. Ryan is a 12-year old boy who went to school for a

short period of time during his reception year and was withdrawn by his parents. His brother Toby is aged nine. Toby has never been to school. Both siblings participated in the study. Both children chose to provide verbal narratives to accompany their photographs.

Measures and analysis

Photographs

In this research photovoice was used as a vehicle for children to develop narratives, in written or verbal form, to answer the research question "what are home-educated children's experiences and perceptions of home education?" The purpose of the study was explained to children and they were given guidance in terms of when might be appropriate to take the photographs, how many to take and how many to include for final analysis. Previous research has demonstrated that five photographs is an appropriate number for this type of approach (see Nelson & Christenson, 2009).

Due to restrictions in time children were advised therefore to take as many photographs as they wished over a two-week period, using a digital camera, and then select the five most important pictures. Children were able to determine what they took photographs of and were able to discuss this with their families. It was suggested that such things as contexts, events, places or objects, which children considered important in showing their experience and perceptions of home education, would be suitable. However, the guidance given stressed that the suggestions did not represent restrictions and what they included was a matter of their own choice, with the proviso that they asked permission of third parties if they were included in their photographs. As a result one child included more photographs than the five suggested, and two children chose to include photographs that had been taken before the suggested two-week period. One child lost all of her original photographs and had to retake them. Most of the children chose to include at least one picture that contained them as subject and had therefore been taken by someone else.

Narratives/interviews/conversations

Children provided narratives in either written or verbal form. Written narratives were in the form of a written caption to the photographs or a powerpoint style presentation. Verbal narratives were provided through semi-structured face-to-face conversations with children, using their photographs as the structure. Conversations with children took place in their homes with their parents either present or nearby. Conversations were recorded in WAV files and copies of the recorded conversations, and where appropriate, typed transcripts of the audio files, were provided to participants for validation. The length of interviews ranged from 20 minutes to one hour as determined by the participants.

Analysis

The analysis of the data followed grounded theory methods (see Charmaz, 2009). The data were coded initially by hand, using line by line coding, followed by more focussed coding using NVivo software. Focussed coding used the codes from the

line by line coding to answer questions such as "what are the children doing?", "why are they doing it?" and "what do children see as the purpose of their actions?" Since the design formed the first phase in the development of a grounded theory of children's engagement in education, focussed coding sought to identify factors that related to children's engagement with their learning and group these into main themes that can be refined in future theoretical samples. As themes developed the memo-writing stage began and this was linked to a further literature search to provide a deeper understanding of those themes. The memo writing stage and further literature search constitute the results and discussion aspect of this article. Further sampling has been carried out with a group of school children with additional support needs.

Results and discussion

Three major themes emerged from the analysis. Identity and development of self were an important theme found in the children's comparisons with other children, the ways in which they chose to engage with learning and their explanations for their engagement with learning. Experience and perceptions of learning was a second theme. Children experienced different types of learning, although these were not readily categorised. A significant element of this theme, however, did emerge and this was choice. Children perceived themselves to have a balance between choice and lack of choice for learning and this influenced their engagement and enthusiasm. The third theme described strong family attachments and good relationships with friends. Relationships with others were an important factor in influencing interests and learning choices and children felt support and encouragement for learning through their relationships.

Identity and development of self

In relation to children's photographs it was noticeable that the majority of children included photographs that showed them doing activities. This suggested that they saw themselves as central to and active in their education. Conversations with the children revealed a sense of ownership over their learning, particularly by older children, which appeared to stem from a clear sense of who they were and how they perceived themselves as individuals. For older children, a sense of self and identity appeared to be an influence on their learning choices. Ryan, for example, explained how his interest in history developed from his perception of his personality traits:

> Ryan: I am a very perfectionist so the Romans, what could be better than the Romans, you know, they had a huge empire so this, that's sort of why I like them. All my favourite animals are the biggest and the best and the most venomous … from then on I've just loved Romans and I love all sorts of bits of history but they're usually things with big empires and the most powerful …

Ryan's interest in history directs many of his choices of activity which further generates his will to engage in learning to develop and structure these activities. In his desire to learn history, Ryan reads books to find out more about the Romans, such as the characters, what they wore and what their armour looked like, in an effort to

recreate these in sword-play. His engagement is self-determined, self-directed and self-regulated:

> Ryan: I read millions of history books usually … I make shields and swords … I made this wooden shield and its, to make it look exactly like a Roman shield … It took hours and hours of searching on the computer to find a thing how to make it … like I spend hours making helmets out of cardboard. I like things to be absolutely perfect. I like making it like a Primus Pilus which was a famous chief centurion. I can get exactly like their armour would have been.

Conversations with some of the children also suggest that they saw themselves as different to school children and to some extent in a more privileged position to school children. Ryan, reflecting on his experience of school, commented that "I didn't feel like I slotted in very well there". Charlotte described school children as "the proper people" suggesting that she perceived herself as different to normal. However, as this was said in the context of her having less formal learning time, this did not appear to be in the sense that she was abnormal or deviant, rather it seemed that she felt herself to be privileged. This was echoed by Annie whose perception of school children, from her vantage point of a hole in her garden fence, was that they "seem like different creatures". Annie's perception was noted in her description of what she felt to be their over-excited behaviour in discovering a beetle at the end of the playground. Her tone and comment suggested that she felt sorry for the school children because she believed they had limited time to delight in nature and that she felt in a privileged position.

A deeper understanding of the impact of children's sense of self and identity, both home and school educated, would be a useful area to explore to identify how it links to educational engagement. Unfortunately, understanding the development of self and identity is a complex area with several theoretical approaches and perspectives which can present difficulties in research (Warin & Muldoon, 2009). However, a useful starting point could be to begin from a position that takes an holistic view of the self as a system (see McCombs & Marzano, 1990), one that incorporates and takes into account the three main dimensions of social/individual, multiple/unitary and historical/present (Warin & Muldoon, 2009).

Experiences and perceptions of learning

Children participate in a wide range of learning activities yet one of the problems encountered in the analysis was in attempting to categorise the types of learning children experienced. Thomas (1998) distinguished teaching and learning in home education as either formal or informal based on, what appears to be, the degree to which learning activities were structured and prescribed (Thomas, 1998). However, distinctions between formal and informal learning are not always clear and are contentious due to overlaps in definitions (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2002; OECD, 2007; Werquin, 2008). Distinctions between informal and formal learning suggest that the two are opposite. However, what constitutes formal learning is often based on historical, social, cultural and pedagogical viewpoints (Colley et al., 2002). A third category – of non-formal learning – makes such distinctions more problematic. The use of the term "non-formal" blurs the distinctions between formal and informal learning as it has unclear boundaries and no clear consensus about its definition (Colley et al., 2002; OECD, 2007; Werquin, 2008). Whilst formal

learning is defined as "organised, has learning objectives and is intentional" (OECD, 2007, p. 4) and informal learning is not organised, does not have learning objectives and is unintentional (Werquin, 2008), non-formal learning may or may not be organised, intentional or have objectives (OECD, 2007). The following extracts demonstrate how the range of learning activities children participate in cannot always be categorised into a formal/informal distinction. Jonathan's learning, for example, appears to have an organised structure:

> Jonathon: Well I have, I have three different books which is English, Maths and I'm learning French at the moment.
> Researcher: Why are you learning French?
> Jonathon: Well mummy wants me to.

The extent to which the learning is intentional may, however, be a matter of interpretation. It raises the question of who sets the agenda for learning. In comparison, Jovi's learning appears to have arisen from his own interests, although the extent to which his learning is organised with specific learning objectives may be open to debate

> Jovi: And the film made me want to build something like this and when I finished it, it's quite good.

The children's intentions for learning were evident in their descriptions about choices they had in learning. The children's responses suggest that they perceived flexibility between parent-determined learning and child-determined learning. Annie described how she experiences this

> Annie: Well, it's kind of like, it's kind of like I have a choice. On some days mum knows what she's doing and some days I just pick what I want so it's kind of like a mixture.

All of the children described being able to make choices. This could be about what they learn, how much they learn, when they learn, where they learn and how they learn. Hannah, for example, described making choices about where to work. She described setting her own learning goals and monitoring her own progress:

> Hannah: I don't work at this desk very often but keep my workbooks there. I like being able to work in different places … I plan my own work for each day and can show someone else where I am up to. … I write down which pages I'm going to do and when I've done them I cross them out.

Charlotte explained that choice is one of the important aspects she likes about home education and why she accepts not always having a choice

> Charlotte: It's just because we get to ride on horses because we're not at school or anything and we get time to feed the rabbits, the animals and things and then we get to play outside … It's because we have, we can go out to play after that and we don't have to do it very long.

Hannah, Charlotte and Annie's descriptions typified the way in which, for many of the children, there is a perceived balance between parent-determined and

child-determined learning. What appears to be significant, when children have choice, is that learning is motivated by interest, developing into enthusiasm and passion. Jonathon, for example, explains his passion for reptiles and amphibians after choosing to find out more about them when he was sent a picture of a snake

> Jonathon: … grandpa sent a picture of an African rock python and then I started studying snakes and then I got this book of reptiles and amphibians and it had lizards in it as well. So I started studying lizards and amphibians and so, and then me and my best friend … we had these ideas of building a zoo when we are older. So, we've got all the cages, we've got all the cages sorted out … we've just drawn where they're gonna be, just put all the different animals into sections like all the reptiles, fish, insects, mammals …

Less clear incidences of learning include Christopher's experience of fire safety and Mia's experience of looking after kittens.

> Christopher: I'm dressed up in a fire fighter's helmet at my home school club. A fire lady came and told us all about fire alarms and stuff and we all got leaflets and got to dress up in her uniform.

In this example the structure of the learning seems to be about fire safety and the context of the home-school club suggests learning is on the agenda. However, Christopher seems able to take what he wants from the learning. He can dress up and have fun and the learning appears to be incidental to this. What Christopher takes from the experience is likely to be linked to his perception of the activity and his intention and motivation for engaging with the activity. What needs discussion is the value of incidental learning and whether it is always necessary to define the objectives and determine the intentions. To infer that learning can only have taken place if what is to be learned is defined beforehand and there is recorded evidence of that learning negates learning that may have been incidental to what has been planned and recorded. Mia's experience, for example, suggests that there are no specific learning objectives or any specific intention for learning, yet the opportunities for learning are apparent.

> Mia: We used to go to a foster home kind of thing for cats … and they got these kittens and I offered to help and they were only two weeks old … the first time we took them for two or three days … they still had to be fed by bottle, a little tiny baby bottle and you had to make them go to the toilet cause they couldn't do it themselves, the way that the mother would do it cause their mother had died … we had to get up in the middle of the night to feed them, they had a very strict pattern. So we had to get up, I think, twice in the night or something to feed them.

Relationships with others

A third theme emerging from the children's narratives is the influence, encouragement and support children experience from others for the choices they make. Observing and interacting with family and friends are often influential as the initial impetus as well as sustaining engagement in learning and are sources of support and encouragement.

Researcher: What else do you like doing?

Jovi: Playing the piano do you want to hear some?

Jovi: Well, first I did it and I thought it was a little bit boring so I stopped and then when I heard Annie's pieces, when I heard how good they are … played Top Cat and stuff like that … when I heard how good … I wanted to do it again … and mummy said that she would play it with me, play the music and the first piece of music that I started on was this one (shows a book of music).

Mia explains further that having her mum easily accessible and supportive of what she wants to achieve from her learning makes it possible for her to reach her potential.

Mia: [about mum] Well, always there to talk to when I've got a problem and always there to help me get what I want to get, help me achieve what I want to achieve. So, if I want to achieve something, I'll go to my mum and ask for a way to possibly get to do that, achieve that …

Conclusions and implications for EP practice

The research found that, for home-educated children, experiences and perceptions of education appear to be influential in the development of their sense of self and identity. For the home-educated children in this research the context in which they experienced their education was an important part of how they identified themselves and compared themselves to others. More crucially, however, was that their sense of self influenced their learning choices, their willingness to learn and their engagement and passion for learning. Whilst "self" and "identity" are complex concepts it would seem important to take an holistic view of the self as a system (McCombs & Marzano, 1990; Warin & Muldoon, 2009), namely to consider it as dynamic and central to the rest of the human system, which includes cognition, directing, controlling and creating self-development (McCombs & Marzano, 1990). This supports the view that fostering an identity which includes children as active citizens in their education has the capacity to influence their learning choices and engagement in a positive way; that children need to experience and live the principles of citizenship (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000), to become fully involved.

The findings of this research also indicate that distinctions between formal and informal learning contexts are not always clear and that learning contexts fall on a continuum between the two. The findings from this research suggested that flexibility within the learning context encouraged engagement and that there was a balance between external regulation and self-determined regulation. When children were given opportunities to explore their own interests they developed enthusiasm for learning and engagement. This supports the evidence cited by Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) and Deci and Ryan (2008) which claims that contexts that support the development of self-regulation through self-determination increase motivation. The implication of this finding is that learning contexts are important for developing engagement. Evidence suggests that learners who experience learning in controlling contexts are less likely to learn, and have lower achievement (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004). One of the issues faced by disaffected children is problems with self esteem, which has been explained by

psychosocial factors including fear of failure and low achievement, affecting their willingness to engage in learning (Humphrey, Charlton, & Newton, 2004).

It is important, however, to consider the role that educational and learning contexts play in this and how this might be addressed. If children perceive education to be authoritarian and restrictive and that compliance with such regimes is what necessitates success, they are unlikely to develop self-regulated styles of motivation to learn in school. Furthermore, such experience of education may increase the perception of education as having little personal value above and beyond doing what is expected and therefore limit any extra-curricular educational enterprise or creativity. Children need to actively participate in their education for external factors to become internalised and valued. An important line of future research would be to develop further understanding of the link between perceived choice in education and outcomes for children in terms of engagement and motivation. The links between this and children's sense of self and identity are also important dimensions to consider.

Finally, children's experiences and perceptions of learning were influenced by their relationships with others. Supportive and encouraging relationships enabled children to initiate, maintain and sustain their interests in learning and develop their exploration of their learning interests. Children need to experience good relationships with others to encourage learning, ones that model and influence appropriate choices. Difficult relationships with others in school have been cited as key factors influencing disengagement from learning (Attwood, Croll, & Hamilton, 2003; Hilton, 2006; Kinder, Wakefield, & Wilkin, 1996).

Interpersonal contexts are viewed as important for cognitive development (Bruner, 1996) and self-regulation (Deci et al., 1991) and secure emotional connections underpin well-being throughout life (Patton, Bond, Butler, & Glover, 2003). Positive emotional support from friends and peers has been shown to increase levels of academic engagement (Perdue, Manzeske, & Estell, 2009) and many studies have shown a positive link between peer relationships and motivation, including skills related to self-regulation (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). Children's interactions with teachers and peers are also crucial in the development of self-regulation (Boekaerts & Cascallar, (2006). A teacher is a "day-to-day" working model and their interactions with children become part of a child's internal dialogue (Bruner, 1966). What seems evident is that children need to feel that others are accessible, can give them appropriate guidance, and support the choices they make as a result of these interactions.

It was noted, however, that a confounding issue in this particular research is that home-educated children's relationship with their teacher is also their relationship with their parents. Relationships with parents are a unique kind of relationship and most parents have a close physical and emotional bond with their children. It may be that home-educating parents have more opportunities to be influential, supportive and encouraging in their children's education as well as having more control and power over their children's learning. Further research in this area is needed which investigates how parental power, control and influence over children's education are linked to educational engagement. This type of research would be particularly useful with regard to improving and promoting positive relationships between schools and parents.

There are, of course, also issues of generalisability in terms of size, design and sample of this research and the possibility of confounding influence of parents

needs to be considered. Other issues are that children's active participation was only in the data collection stages of the research and their narratives were interpreted by the researcher. As Hobbs, Todd & Taylor, (2000) state, interpretations of children's voices can be influenced by researchers' views about child development and what constitutes childhood. Although, conversely, it is important to consider the extent to which adult narratives are also completely without influence from others. These issues could, however, be addressed in future research by triangulating samples and using a design that enables participants to be active at all stages of the research process, thus helping to ensure that what they wish to say, what they say and how they wish to say it are more likely to be preserved.

Due to the evolving nature of educational psychologists' roles, educational psychologists are in a strong position, based on their relationships with children, schools and families, to attempt to cross what Lees (2011) terms the incommensurability bridge and provide both expertise in the design of evidence-based research in education as well as specific support to home-educating families. There is a current focus of educational psychology as community psychology and on the development of research that supports an evidence based understanding of children's educational needs (cf. Binnie, Allen, & Beck, 2008; King & Wilson, 2006; Stobie, 2002). Since the majority of families in the UK educate their children at school, home education is an area that is often overlooked. Educational psychologists working in the broader community are well placed to contribute to the current body of research in order that local authorities have accurate, up-to-date information and a deeper knowledge about home education, to assist them in supporting the families who educate their children at home.

Home-educating families argue that they are not able to access the funding and services that schools have in order to educate their children. This is an issue which is not within the remit of this paper but is worthy of further investigation to consider ways in which support can be made available (to which home-educating families should be entitled), including the support of professionals such as educational psychologists. Furthermore, a deeper awareness of the positive aspects of alternative forms of education may assist educational psychologists, in their role of supporting children, families and schools, in the design of specific interventions to address issues that may be having a detrimental effect on an individual child's engagement within school. This may be useful in cases where families may be experiencing problems with school or may be considering home education for their child due to perceived negative influences of school. Educational psychologists should be in a position to be able to provide advice and guidance to families on a variety of topics, such as children's cognitive development, additional support needs, teaching and learning practices as well as community links, to enable families who want to educate their children at home make more informed choices.

Without sound evidence based knowledge and information, professional views about home education are likely to be made using heuristics and biases and thus be flawed. A clearer understanding of children's experiences and perceptions of home education has been a useful starting point for developing a theory of engagement in education and may offer some future avenues for exploration in tackling school disaffection.

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