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Using the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey to examine the prevalence and characteristics of families who home educate in the UK

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This paper has two aims, first to examine the feasibility of using an omnibus survey to estimate the prevalence and characteristics of families who home educate and secondly to provide an empirical contribution to recent research on home education in the UK. Because there is no statutory requirement for families who home educate to register with the Local Authority, there are no nationally representative data on the prevalence and characteristics of the home educating population in this country. Therefore gathering data from a fully randomised sample of home educating families would be prohibitively expensive. In this study we used a national omnibus survey to collect data on the homeschooling experiences of over 6000 households from across the UK, of whom 52 were found to have engaged in homeschooling. Our findings estimate that around 1% of families with dependent children have home educated either on a full or part-time basis. Provision of home education was often episodic and reflects the diversity of the home educating population. While the findings presented here largely confirm previous work on home education in the UK, other work tends to be based largely in the home educating community and often lacks a comparison with the general population. Using an omnibus survey like the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey enables researchers to gather data from a nationally representative sample of a small and diverse social group.

Keywords: home education; secondary data analysis; education policy

Introduction

Elective home education (EHE) in the UK is a topical issue, with government, local health and social service departments as well as the media, becoming more interested and involved in this area. This, in part, is a consequence of recent high profile child protection cases, such as the death of Khyra Ishaq, a seven year old girl from Birmingham who died from abuse and neglect after having been withdrawn from school on the understanding she was to be home educated (BBC 2010). Moreover, a review into home education commissioned by the previous Labour Government into EHE (Badman Review 2009) identified the need for additional research in this area, and in particular on the numbers and characteristics of home educated children and young people.

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While research conducted by Fortune-Wood (2005) has estimated that UK EHE figures are somewhere in the region of 40–85,000, there is no national register of home educated children, we know little about how they are distributed nationally nor about the characteristics of families who decide to home educate. Indeed recent research in nine Local Authorities (LAs) by the former Department for Children Schools and Families estimated that the practice might be higher than expected, particularly among some ethnic groups (DfES 2007). Understanding the nature and prevalence of EHE is important for LAs so that they can allocate resources fairly. However it is also important for social justice reasons: for the right of the parent to determine the best educational provision for their child but also for the right of the child to have access to a broad and balanced curriculum, to be safe from harm and to develop the skills that are needed to become socially and morally responsible members of society.

The aim of this study was to use the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Opinions and Lifestyle Survey to estimate the prevalence and characteristics of young people who are home educated in the UK. The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN, formerly the Omnibus Survey) was established in 1990 to meet the needs of Government departments who wanted access to a survey with a quick turnaround time but which offered high statistical reliability as well as a properly designed random sample. It has since become a valuable tool for academic researchers (ESDS 2010). This survey is particularly useful for the current study because we do not know what proportion of the population is home educated nor where they might be located; and so the costs involved in developing and administering a full survey with a randomly selected sub-sample of the UK population would be prohibitive.

This study can be summarised by the following research questions:

- What is the prevalence of EHE children and young people in the UK?
- What are the demographic characteristics of home educated children and their families?
- What reasons to home educating families give for engaging in the practice?
- To what extent does the OPN omnibus survey provide useful data on a small and potentially difficult to research group?

EHE in the UK

The legal context for home education in the UK is clear: while education is compulsory, schooling is not. In England and Wales, section 7 of the Education Act (1996) indicates that the responsibility for a child's education rests with their parents and that education can be provided at school or "otherwise". There is also no legal obligation for parents to notify their Local Authority (LA) of their intention to home educate if their child has never attended school. In order to be satisfied that a child is receiving a suitable education, LAs may ask to meet with the family. However, parents do not have to allow representatives from the LA into their home, nor are they obliged to follow the National Curriculum, or to provide a set number of hours of education (Nelson 2013).

Thus, while LAs have a duty to ensure that adequate education is being provided and to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in line with statutory legislation, they have limited powers in this area with regard to EHE. This lack of

state oversight into EHE was addressed by the former Labour government in 2009 when it commissioned Lord Badman to lead the first comprehensive review of home education in England. The Badman Review (2009) was conducted between January and April 2009 and was contentious from the outset. For example those in the home education community argued that the explicit linkage by the Review of home education to child safeguarding issues (particularly in light of the Khyra Ishaq case) was unfounded and that there was no evidence to suggest that home educated children were more at risk of abuse compared to their schooled peers (Nelson 2013). When the Badman Review was finally published, it recommended the mandatory registration of all home educated children with their LA, as well as requiring some oversight of the extent to which provision was deemed “suitable” and “efficient” (Badman Review 2009). These recommendations were rejected by the EHE community who argued that registration and inspection procedures would limit the rights of parents to choose and provide the educational provision they deemed to be appropriate (Nelson 2013). The change of Government following the elections in May 2010 led to the recommendations of the Badman Review being dropped and the context for EHE in England and Wales, at least at present, remains very liberal, with minimal state oversight of the process. This is despite the efforts of the Welsh Assembly recently to make parents register their home educated children – the proposal for which was dropped after a backlash from parents (BBC 2014).

Consequently it is difficult to determine how many children are being home educated in England and Wales as well as the quality of education that is being provided. There have, however, been several recent studies into EHE in the UK, the most pertinent to this paper are summarised below.

The prevalence of home education in the UK

The numbers and characteristics of home educating students and their families in the UK are not comprehensive and this reflects the quality of data on home education worldwide. Indeed the absence of a national registration scheme for home educating young people makes understanding the prevalence and characteristics of this group particularly difficult (DfES 2007). Fortune-Wood’s (2005) study into home education over a two year period (September 2002 to January 2004) is one of the most comprehensive to date and estimates that the numbers of home educated students are somewhere in the region of 40–85,000. This figure was based on extrapolation of data provided by 263 questionnaires with EHE families. While the data has to be treated with caution due to the small numbers involved and the non-random nature of data collection, it does provide a useful indication of the size of the EHE population. Indeed other studies, such as the DfES (2007) feasibility study into EHE (nine LAs sampled) and the Badman Review (2009) (90 LAs sampled) have also cited similar numbers of home educated children and young people. So the consensus appears to be that the number home educated children and young people in the UK lies between 45,250 and 150,000 (DfES 2007).

This does seem to suggest that EHE is a relatively popular choice for parents and sits alongside reports that the number of families who chose educate their children in this way is growing. For example:

The number of parents in Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Swindon giving up on state education and teaching their children themselves is increasing. Five years ago

local authority records showed just over 400 children were being educated at home in those areas. It now stands at more than 640 – a rise of more than 50%. (BBC 2011)

However, despite some evidence to suggest that families who home educate are part of a growing population, this data should be treated with caution. As discussed above, home educators are not required by law to register with their LA unless the child has been withdrawn from school. Thus, any apparent increase in numbers could be attributed to home educating parents deciding to register with their LAs months or years later (although this is perhaps unlikely); or it could be the result of more meticulous record keeping by LAs following the Badman Review (2009).

The characteristics of home educating families in the UK

Existing data on the characteristics of the home educating population in the UK should also be treated with caution given that research is limited and is often small scale, making findings difficult to generalise. Research by Fortune-Wood (2005) and Rothermel (2003) has indicated that home educating families are a diverse group that comprise a range of “traditional” and “less traditional” family units, and were not confined to a particular geographical area. With regards to occupational background, while both studies found that parents had a wide range of educational backgrounds and careers, they tended to be well educated or employed in professional occupations. For example, Rothermel’s (2003) sample containing relatively highly proportions of parents who had been university educated: at least 40% of families contained at least one trained teacher. However despite this, Fortune-Wood (2005) argues that the home educating families included in their study did not represent the stereotype of a “middle class elite”, because they tended to be less wealthy than average, possibly due in part to family size and income. For example, the average size of home educated families was slightly larger than the national average with the majority of children (60%) living in families with three or more siblings; although this differed in respect of single parent families.

Thus, the findings as outlined in Fortune-Wood (2005) and Rothermel’s (2003) studies reveal that home educators represent a wide cross-section of society, but there are also some commonalities with regards to family type or professional background. This could be attributed to the fact that home educating families in many cases have to survive on one income due to one parent (usually the mother) providing education at home.

The reasons why families home educate

The reasons why families home educate have been explored quite extensively even in countries where home education research is limited (e.g. Merry and Howell 2009; Spiegler 2009; Blok and Karsten 2011). This is perhaps because it is arguably one of the easier topics to research, not just from a data collection point of view but also because it is unlikely to offend the sensibilities of home educators in the same way that more personal questions relating to home education practise or provision might present.

One study into the motives for EHE was conducted more than 20 years ago by Van Galen (1988) with 23 parents (16 home educating families) in a south eastern state of the USA. Van Galen’s (1988) study categorised North American home educators into two groups: “Ideologues” and “Pedagogues”. The “Ideologues” were

defined as those who objected to what was taught in schools: perhaps holding traditional conservative values and following a philosophy of Christian fundamentalism. Whereas “pedagogues” had educational reasons for home schooling: school teaching was viewed as inept and limiting because it focused solely on learning opportunities provided by the teacher. While these categories may still be useful in identifying some of the motivations behind the decision to home educate (particularly in the US), the growth in home education over the last two decades has meant that the reasons for choosing this approach have become much more complex and diverse (Neuman 2004). This is reflected by more recent research in this area in the UK, which reveals the wide variety of motivations for EHE. Rothmel’s (2003) study is particularly noteworthy because it is one of the largest studies into EHE motivations in this country. In total 419 EHE families took part (1099 children, eleven years and under). The findings from the questionnaire phase of the research indicated that parents had multiple reasons for home educating which included: disappointment with education and schools; ideological reasons; bullying and child depression and stress, as well as, parents’ own negative school experiences and peer pressure.

Parsons and Lewis’s (2010) research with 27 parents of SEN children also suggests that although EHE is undertaken for a wide variety of reasons, it was mainly because the child was unhappy in school or that the parents were dissatisfied with provision. This echoes the findings from Nelson’s research (2013) which found that dissatisfaction with formal provision and the perceived failure of the school to meet a child’s needs adequately was the main motivating factor for home education. This was highlighted poignantly by one young person:

I was home educated for four years from the age of 12 to 16 ... I felt that I had kind of reached a glass ceiling with school. I wasn’t been allowed to develop in a way that was suitable for me. I was the slowest child in the class and sometimes I would be slow but then I would catch up with the others. I would grow in spurts. (143)

The literature on motivations to home educate indicates that home educators are not a homogenous group but consist of a wide range of individuals who pursue this provision for many different reasons. These include families who decide to home educate out of necessity because their child may have special educational needs or might have been bullied in school. Other families do so because they find home education a more convenient and flexible approach or as a temporary stop-gap with the intention of returning to mainstream education.

In general recent research into the prevalence and characteristics of the home educating population in the UK have revealed them to be a diverse group which tends not to be confined to a particular geographical location, family type, occupational background or ethnic group. However nationally representative data on this group is difficult to obtain, mainly because they are relatively small in number and are spread among a diverse range of formal and informal settings. Indeed following their review of EHE provision the DCSF concluded that it was not feasible to reliably assess the prevalence of home educated children through a national survey of LAs or by using home education organisations as a route to obtain data or access to families (DfES 2007). Therefore a key aim of this study was to consider the feasibility of using a large national omnibus survey to provide up to date information on home education in the UK.

Data collection

The OPN is a monthly multi-purpose omnibus survey which is administered by the Office for National Statistics to a randomly selected sample of British households. Each month 67 postal sectors are selected, with probability of inclusion proportionate to size. Within each sector, 30 addresses are chosen randomly giving an initial sample of 2010 addresses each month. One person per household is selected as the respondent (ONS 2013c-h). The survey uses a random probability sample stratified in four layers: by region, by the proportion of households with no car, by the proportion of households where the household reference person is in the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) categories one to three and finally by the proportion of people who are aged over 65 years (ONS 2013c-h, 5).

Data collection is by face to face interview with a specially trained interviewer. Prior to the interview advance letters are sent to each of the selected addresses to provide a brief background to the survey. Interviewers make up to eight calls at each selected address at different times and on different days of the week. Each month the survey comprises one core module of demographic questions plus a second module of non-core questions which can vary each month. This process of asking questions on multiple topics within the same interview is a distinctive feature of an omnibus survey and this makes it a particularly useful data collection tool for researchers wishing to gather a relatively small amount of data from a nationally representative sample.

To date question modules on over 300 topics have been included in the OPN but none have asked about home education. In this study we placed two questions on EHE into the non-core module of the OPN. These questions were repeated for six months, providing us with a total sample of 6135 households (Table 1). A full list of the questions that were included in the home education part of the survey is given in the Appendix 1. Response rates to the survey were good, at just below 60% and were in line with previous sweeps of the OPN (ONS 2014).

Previous estimates of EHE have not been derived from nationally representative samples, in the current study the sampling techniques that are used by the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey enabled us to start to remedy this and to provide a more accurate assessment of the prevalence and characteristics of homeschooled children and young people. In the survey respondents were asked whether or not they currently, or had ever, home schooled their child or children. This allowed us to consider two different groups of families: those who had school age children and those whose families had grown up. Key findings are presented next.

Table 1. Sampling and response rates for each of the six waves.

	April	May	June	July	August	September
Initial sample	2010	2010	2010	2010	2010	2010
Eligible households	1813	1788	1796	1826	1823	1814
No interview – refusal	581	614	549	613	571	601
Ineligible	18	3	22	15	3	3
No interview – non contact	183	217	193	167	184	188
Interview taken	1031	954	1032	1031	1065	1022
Response rate (%)	57	53	57	57	58	56

Source: ONS (2013c-h).

Findings

The findings from the survey are presented in three sections, each linking to the research questions described above. These sections relate to the prevalence of the home educating population, their characteristics and the reasons families give for deciding to home educate their children.

The prevalence of home education in the UK

As discussed earlier, providing reliable estimates on the prevalence of home education in the UK is limited by the small size of the EHE population with previous estimates suggesting that around 1% of the school population are home educated (Nelson 2013). Therefore we were already expecting this study to produce relatively small numbers of families who have experience of home education. Despite this concern, this is a worthwhile research activity because it uses a nationally sampled data-set to examine the feasibility of conducting research with a representative group of people who are part of a relatively small, but important, group in society. Deriving meaningful estimates of home-educated students from this data-set is also problematic because the data is for households and not for individual children. The survey also asked whether a household had *ever* home educated their child/children because we were not just interested in those children in school today. The data can therefore give us two separate estimates for the percentage of households who have home educated: one for all families with children and another for those families whose children are currently in school. This data is presented in Table 2 and shows that both estimates are the same: around 1.3% of the UK households with (or without) children under the age of 16 have home educated either on a part or full-time basis.

With regard to families who currently have children under the age of 16, we can make some tentative estimates about the size of the current home schooled population. As there were 7.7 million families with dependent children in the UK in 2013 (ONS 2013a), we can use the data from this survey to estimate that the numbers of families who home educate on a full or part-time basis will be in the region of 100,000 and those who home educate full-time only will be around 23,400. The average number of children in a family was 1.7 (ONS 2013b) and so the numbers of children who have been home educated on a full or part-time basis is likely to be in the region of 170,000, or around 40,000 for those who are home educated full time. This estimate is similar to that provided in other research, for example DfES (2007).

Table 2. Estimates of the prevalence of home education in the UK.

	Whole sample		Families with children under 16	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Child/children fully homeschooled	7	0.2	5	0.3
Child/children partly homeschooled	45	1.1	16	1.0
Total number homeschooled	52	1.3	21	1.3
Child/children not homeschooled	3900	98.7	1523	98.7
Respondent has no children	2184	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	6135	100	1544	100

However this does assume that all children in the family are homeschooled but the literature and other data gathered in this study suggests that this is not the case and so it is likely that the number of home schooled young people is towards the lower end of this estimate.

Characteristics of families who home educate

Research into the characteristics of families who home educate in the UK tends to suggest that they are a relatively diverse group (e.g. DfES 2007). This is supported by the findings from this study. Although the sample is too small to allow full consideration of different ethnic minority groups, it appears from this data that the prevalence of home education among ethnic minority groups reflects their distribution in the wider population (Table 3). For example, 86% of all families who home educate identified themselves as White British and this is the same as their distribution in the larger sample and in the UK population, in general (ONS 2012).

Table 4 shows the distribution of the sample in terms of their highest academic qualification. Around one fifth (22%) of the whole sample were educated to degree level or equivalent, however among those who have home educated this figure is higher (at 40%). Despite the relatively small number of cases for this variable, this suggests that families who home educate are likely to have higher levels of education than the rest of the sample as well as those who do not home educate. However if we only consider the subgroup of families who have children younger than 16, their academic qualifications are more reflective of the wider sample: here 24% of those who home educate have degree level qualifications. This may be a result of the very small sample size for this variable but it confirms the findings from other studies that have considered similar variables (e.g. Parsons and Lewis 2010).

Table 5 shows the employment status of the sample. Taking into account the small sample size for the home educating families, these figures are reasonably similar across all groups. For example, 56% of the sample population indicated that they were in some form of employment; the figure for home educating families was higher, at 62%. However the sample size for the latter group was just 32 individuals and it needed only three individuals to respond differently to this question to bring the percentage to 56%. So the main conclusion here is that there is little to suggest that the home educating population is any different from the wider sample. One difference may be the higher number of home educating families where the main respondent claims to be unemployed however the small numbers involved means that caution is needed in the interpretation of this data.

Table 3. Characteristics of the UK home educated population: ethnic group.

	Total		Home educate		Do not home educate	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>All families</i>						
White British	5281	86	45	86	3396	87
Other	853	13	7	14	504	12
<i>Families with children younger than 16</i>						
White British	1202	78	15	71	1187	78
Other	343	22	6	29	337	22

Table 4. Characteristics of the UK home educated population: highest qualification.

	Total		Home educate		Do not home educate	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<i>All families</i>						
Degree or equivalent	1351	22	21	40	795	20
Below degree level	2823	46	19	36	1712	44
<i>Families with children younger than 16</i>						
Degree or equivalent	447	29	5	24	442	29
Below degree level	751	49	10	48	741	48

Table 5. Characteristics of the UK home educated population: employment status.

	Total		Home educate		Do not home educate	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<i>All families</i>						
In Employment	3430	56	32	62	2167	56
ILO Unemployed	326	5	5	10	156	4
Economically Inactive	2380	39	15	29	1587	41
<i>Families with children younger than 16</i>						
In Employment	1195	77	13	65	1182	78
ILO Unemployed	85	5	5	25	80	5
Economically Inactive	264	17	2	10	262	17

The final characteristic for comparison is occupational group. For those who are in employment, this relates to the occupational group of the main respondent to the survey. Data has been coded according to the three main NS-SEC occupational classifications: managerial/professional, intermediate and routine and manual (see ONS 2013c-h). Despite the relatively small sample size there are some findings worth examining. When considering the whole sample, it does seem as if families who home educate are more likely to belong to managerial or professional occupational groups and are less likely to belong to routine or manual groups (although the usual caveats about sample size still apply). However when just families with school age children are considered, the difference in the proportion belonging to managerial or professional occupational groups among home educating families and the remainder of the sample is a lot smaller (Table 6).

The reasons families decide to home educate

Respondents were also asked to provide the main reason why they chose to home educate their children. These reasons can be grouped into four main categories: school related reasons, logistic reasons due to housing, special circumstances and philosophical or religious reasons (Table 7).

The most frequently given reasons why families decided to home educate were related to school, these fell into three main categories: dissatisfaction with the quality of educational provision, bullying at school and school refusal on the part of the child. Dissatisfaction with the school was often linked to the child's perceived unfair

Table 6. Characteristics of the UK home educated population: occupational group.

	Total		Home educated		Not home educated	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<i>All families</i>						
Managerial/professional	1701	28	21	41	1099	28
Intermediate occupations	1058	17	12	23	720	18
Routine and manual	1512	25	4	8	989	25
<i>Families with children younger than 16</i>						
Managerial /professional	588	36	6	30	552	36
Intermediate occupations	370	24	7	35	363	24
Routine and manual	435	28	0	0	435	28

Table 7. Reasons why families decide to home educate.

Reason for homeschooling	Number of cases
School related	20
Bullying	4
Dissatisfaction with the school	13
School refusal	3
Logistic reasons	12
Family moving abroad	7
Family moving to UK	3
Other logistical reasons	2
Special circumstances	11
Health related	7
Child had Special Educational Needs	4
Philosophical/religious reasons	2

treatment by teachers or the school system in general and was an area of concern according to several of the respondents. A particular issue was students having trouble with individual teachers or pupils, in the case of reports of bullying, which resulted in the child being withdrawn from school. Wider issues of the quality of schooling especially dissatisfaction with the state school system, were raised by a number of respondents:

... schooling isn't good enough, non-qualified teachers, too big class sizes, school day too short, my children were in the middle and not progressing.

Other reasons for taking the decision to home educate, either on a permanent or temporary basis related to logistical arrangements such as the family moving to or from the UK, or the remoteness of their homes within the country. Often such arrangements are likely to have meant that periods of home education were episodic and related to local conditions either abroad or in the UK.

... because we were in china and I wanted them to keep their Welsh up and to teach them things they would have learned from home.

Home education also appeared to have a key role for families whose child had health related issues or special educational needs. Again such periods of home

schooling were likely to be episodic, coinciding with a prolonged stay in hospital for example. In the case of children and young people with special educational needs, the decision whether or not to home educate was more complex, especially when parents felt that the school was unable or unwilling to accommodate their child (e.g. Parsons and Lewis 2010):

... the equality act did not exist, my daughter was wheelchair bound and school refused to accept her.

Finally families also provided more philosophical/religious reasons for taking the decision to home educate. Sometimes these are linked directly to religious reasons: 'that's what God wanted us to do at that time'. In other cases they relate to formal education in general, unlike above where reasons tended to be more specific to treatment in current education context.

I felt that classroom education is too formal and restrictive. Also class size can be too large and I could provide a better, more rounded education.

These findings are largely confirmatory in nature and support previous research that indicates that the reasons families choose to home educate are many and varied (e.g. Fortune-Wood 2005; Nelson 2013). In the context of the research undertaken in the present study that the findings largely confirm other research is of particular interest in our consideration of whether the OPN is a feasible tool for gathering data in this area.

Discussion

This paper has two aims, first to examine the feasibility of using an omnibus survey to estimate the prevalence and characteristics of families who home educate and secondly to provide an empirical contribution to recent research on home education in the UK. With regard to using an omnibus study to examine the characteristics of a minority group in society, the process of data collection and retrieval worked extremely well. The ONS has a dedicated team who provide advice on questionnaire design and survey administration, and data collection proceeded without incident. The funding for this research allowed us to gather data from six sweeps of the OPN, at a cost of around £12K. The relatively low cost of the survey also meant that it is a useful research tool for researchers working with small budgets and to restricted time scales and therefore might be a data collection approach that is of particular use to new career researchers. It also makes it a useful approach for gathering data from a nationally representative group of people who are characterised by small numbers and a wide geographical spread and also provides opportunities for mixed methods research by identifying participants for inclusion in future in-depth research.

The following main findings have emerged from the study. The home educating population in the UK is relatively small, around 1% of those who have dependent children report that they have home educated on a full or part-time basis. Indeed, the majority of families who decide to home educate do so for limited periods of time, only a very small proportion choose to home educate on a long term basis. Households that home educate are a relatively diverse group. Although our data shows that in comparison to the general population and families who do not home educate, they tend to be slightly more likely to be educated to degree level or higher

and come from professional or intermediate occupational groups. The reasons households gave for home educating were also varied. The most likely were school related - such as dissatisfaction with their child's school, particular teachers or bullying by other pupils. Students were also home educated for medical reasons, sometimes this was for a relatively short period of time following an accident, while others were for much longer periods. Only a very small number of respondents said that they home schooled for religious or philosophical reasons, with a larger number home educating while working abroad or upon arrival in the UK.

The reasons for home education were therefore many and varied and in some cases the motivation provided for home educating one child may not be the same as the motivation for home educating another. Thus as Rothemel (2003) has argued, home educators cannot be categorised according to a single coherent identity which generally has either spiritual or religious connotations and in many instances only serve to reinforce negative stereotypes. Thus, as the literature on this area reveals, home education is no longer the preserve of conservative Christians or left wing liberals but instead includes families from different backgrounds who have numerous reasons for engaging in this provision.

To a large extent the empirical research presented here is largely confirmatory in that it supports other recent findings about the characteristics and prevalence of home education in the UK. However it also offers a different approach to gathering data from a small but diverse social group. While the achieved sample size was small, this reflects the distribution of this group in society. In addition, had the funds been available it might have been worth running subsequent sweeps of the OPN in order to boost the EHE sample. But the similarity of the findings with other studies suggests that this approach to data collection is not incompatible with more traditional methods of research that take place from within the EHE community.

A further implication of using this approach to data collection comes with the challenges to researchers that are posed by the increased diversity of educational provision in England. The cornerstone of current education policy in England has been a move towards more diverse schooling and increased parental choice. The decision of the then newly elected Coalition Government not to endorse the recommendations of the Badman Review (2009) are indicative of an ideology that prizes the parent's right to choose the most suitable education for their child over the involvement and oversight of the State. As schooling become more diverse, traditional methods for data collection might be less useful in enabling researchers to draw conclusions about the impact of policies on the national population. Survey methodology such as that adopted by the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey might provide one useful solution to the challenges of data collection from small and disparate groups.

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Notes on contributors

Emma Smith is a professor of Education at the University of Leicester. Her research interests are in areas of education policy and inequality. She is the author of *Key Issues in Education and Social Justice* published by Sage.

Jeanette Nelson was an ESRC-funded doctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham between 2010 and 2013. Her research interests are in the areas of home education, participatory rights and choice, and insider–outsider perspectives in qualitative research.

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Appendix 1. National Statistics Opinions and Lifestyle Survey – April 2013

Module MDT

Home Schooling

MDT_1

Have you ever had children who lived with you and for whom you had parental responsibility, even though they are no longer living in your household?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

MDT_Intro

In this section we are interested in finding out about families who home school their children. Homeschooling is defined as where parents or guardians decide to provide education for their child(ren) at home rather than sending them to school. We would like to know about parents who home school their child(ren) and their reasons for doing so.

MDT_Many

Altogether, how many children have you had parental responsibility for?

Please include children who are members of the household, and any children who are not members of the Household.

MDT_2

Do you currently, or have you ever, home schooled your child?

- (1) My child was entirely home schooled
- (2) My child was partly home schooled
- (3) My child was not home schooled
- (4) Other (Please specify)

MDT_2a

Do you currently, or have you ever, home schooled your children?

- (1) All of my children were entirely home schooled
- (2) All of my children were partly home schooled
- (3) Some of my children were entirely home schooled
- (4) Some of my children were partly home schooled
- (5) None of my children were home schooled
- (6) Other (Please specify)

MDT_3

Please can you tell us why you home schooled your child/children?