

Misunderstood, Marginalised or Embraced? Examining the place of home education in the Christian community

Sarah E. Holmes & Harriet Pattison

To cite this article: Sarah E. Holmes & Harriet Pattison (2024) Misunderstood, Marginalised or Embraced? Examining the place of home education in the Christian community, Practical Theology, 17:5, 456-468, DOI: [10.1080/1756073X.2024.2386788](https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2024.2386788)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2024.2386788>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 08 Oct 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 216



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Misunderstood, Marginalised or Embraced? Examining the place of home education in the Christian community

Sarah E. Holmes  and Harriet Pattison

School of Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

How do UK Christian home educators feel about their role and function in wider Christian society? An online survey of Christian home educators ($n=462$) was analysed thematically and examined through the lens of a theology of belonging. Findings revealed respondents feeling more positively viewed by the Christian community than they are by wider society. However, less than half felt supported by their local church or wider Christian community. Strong feelings of isolation and judgment conveyed UK Christian home educators feeling excluded and misunderstood. The local church and wider Christian community need to intentionally counter these experiences and improve inclusion.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 March 2024

Accepted 29 July 2024

KEYWORDS

Christian home education;
community; inclusion;
belonging; perceptions;
experiences

Introduction

I can always tell if a child is home educated because of the way they behave in church – they're just not used to being with others, and they're really very disruptive to our Sunday School.

The above is a comment made during informal conversation at a national conference for Christians working with children and young people. Anecdotal reports and conversations indicate frequent judgments of this nature in the Christian community, as well as wider society, regarding home-educating families. This paper therefore explores the experiences and perceptions of Christian home educators in the UK. The data were collected from 462 Christian home educators via an online survey of both open-ended and closed responses. The survey was carried out in the summer of 2022, when home educators were expressing heightened concerns due to the proposed Schools Bill of the British Government. The Schools Bill was a proposed framework of laws to underpin the government's ambition to raise education standards across England, including a register for children who were not in school. However, there were widespread concerns that the bill would have given government ministers sweeping and unprecedented powers over how schools and home-educating families operate. Conversely, some voices expressed that it would have

CONTACT Sarah E. Holmes  holmess1@hope.ac.uk  School of Education, Liverpool Hope University, Hope Park, Liverpool L16 9JD, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

been beneficial for home-educating families. This context provided a window of time when Christian home educators felt compelled to share their experiences and feelings, where previously they had preferred not to do so and were often suspicious and cautious of taking part in research. The wider project asked respondents for their opinions about the Schools Bill and their home education approaches, but this paper explores their experiences within the UK Christian community, through the lens of a theology of belonging.

Elective home education has increased markedly in the UK in recent years (ADCS 2021), with research insights alongside this having also become more prevalent (Ray 2017). However, although many religious families opt to home educate, there is minimal research on the religious preferences and political affiliations of home-educating parents (Ray 2017). Nevertheless, Christian home education has become increasingly common due to changes in the role of religion in the education system of state schools (Wilhelm and Firmin 2009). Christian education has been said to train for the Christian way of life (Wolterstorff 1980), and view the educational environment as being the parent's first responsibility to their child (Ginty 2022). Yet, there are many and varied views surrounding religious home educating, such as the notion that it provides key opportunities for civic conversations across ideological differences (Kunzman 2010) and provides training for how their child can function as a valued member of society, whilst conversely others insinuate that home educators are distinct, strange, and somewhat of an oddity of society (Lubienski 2003; Morton 2010). Indeed, Muslim home educators in the UK have been cited as isolationist and potential radicalisers of their children (Pattison 2020). Yet minimal research has examined the perceptions and place of home educators within the Christian community in contemporary times. This paper aims to contribute insights to that gap since one of the authors is herself a home-educating parent and has extensive professional knowledge and experience in the field, and the other author is significantly experienced in the state school system but works primarily amongst church ministry. This beneficial collaboration enabled thorough and balanced empirical investigation and analysis of the data collected.

Background

Inclusion and participation in community

Participation pertains to social inclusion and the ability to take part in specific activities in the society surrounding an individual (Bellamy et al. 2007). The terms 'diversity', 'inclusion', and 'belonging' are often associated with one another but the connections between the concepts are highly complex (Adejumo 2021), although a sense of inclusion and belonging is vital for individuals' sense of well-being (Basok and George 2021). Swinton (2012) considered these terms with regard to disability, concluding that indicators of difference portray negative perceptions of social and minority groups in a negativised form. Indeed, he argued that the notion of difference intimates that there are normal and abnormal human beings. Swinton (2012) makes the point that norms tend to be consensual as well as statistical, namely decided by the majority. Yet, being included and enabled to participate is a key human need. McCormick and Barthelemy (2021) revealed the lack of inclusion often reported by LGBTQ+ individuals due to them having identities deemed to be invalid by the wider community. Likewise, Basok and

George (2021) found that perceived lack of inclusion of minority farmers was highly impactful on their well-being and effectiveness, and Swinton (2012) emphasised the impact of not truly noticing and listening to the identities, needs, and preferences of those with disabilities. This may be due to different understandings of the notions of community and participation (Carey 2011). Tøssebro et al. (2012) argued that implementation of inclusion is often half-hearted and inconsiderate. Indeed, Wu et al. (2021) found that for a particularly vulnerable group (refugees), the degree to which they felt at ease to practice religion significantly impacted their happiness levels; connecting frequently with the sense of welcome and belonging they felt from their religious community.

Furthermore, belonging connects with the affective dimension of commitment and may be understood as an expression of the social and emotional attachments forged by individuals amongst one another and social groups (May 2013; Meyer and Allen 1997). This sense can be strengthened by enabling the rights of an individual to participate in social, cultural, and material practices which enhance the sense of belonging (Esses et al. 2010). Conversely, denying rights and participation results in individuals being less likely to feel included (Fangen, Johansson, and Hammaren 2012). This sense of emotional attachment, belonging, and relational connection has been found to be more effective in small, intimate gatherings (Dougherty and Whitehead 2011). This is interesting to note within the discussion about belonging in the Christian community.

Hawkley, Browne, and Cacioppo (2005) presented three dimensions or degrees of social connection; intimate connectedness, relational connectedness, and collective connectedness. Humans are deemed to require all three dimensions of these social needs to be met in order to be socially fulfilled. It is the third realm of collective connectedness which aligns to church communities, whereby people enjoy a shared sense of purpose (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). Such relationships reveal a connectivity that is basic to humanity (Bennett 1997), and it is key to consider the holistic nature of relationships rather than merely the space between those relating (Giles, Smythe, and Spence 2012). Evaluating relationships within the context of a community highlights the inter-connectedness of the web of communal relationships co-existing in everyday experiences (Palmer 1997), specifically within interactions amongst the Christian community. It is important that the embodied ways that individuals are engaging in communities and related to others are noted to accurately gain insight (Lelievre and Marshall 2015). Indeed, Carey (2011) alleged that community care is often based on an idealised view of life. To mitigate this mindset, Coleman (2022) called for organisations to adopt intentional and transformative inclusion, diversity, belonging, equity, and access to ensure their future readiness.

Christian understanding of community and belonging

Biblical teaching coined the term 'koinonia' to represent the need for Christians to intimately know one another as members of the church family (Freeze and Di Tommaso 2015), resonating with the notion of the church being the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. Other New Testament passages such as Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 7:22 convey that human beings are all one in Christ Jesus; the ultimate sense of belonging. Flowing from these passages, Christian community equates to community through and in Jesus Christ, so that all belong to one another through and in Jesus Christ (Bonhoeffer 2007). The character, values, and language of Jesus throughout the gospels express inclusivity,

and the Great Commission implores followers to aim for this model (Howell 2015). Hence, the collective and relational sense of the church viewed as family promotes and enables individuals within the church family to grow and thrive together (Hellerman 2009).

Swinton (2012) argued that the notion of inclusion is deeply inadequate for this context and called for a shift of thinking from inclusion to belonging, incorporating a reframing of practices from politics to love. He distinguished between merely *including somebody*, which does not equate to them feeling that they *belong*. Acceptance and friendship can sometimes be superficial and tokenistic. However, it has been shown that the ability of an individual to depend on church family predicted higher levels of spiritual and emotional well-being (Freeze and Di Tommaso 2015; Krause 2006). The term *koinonia* conveys the need for Christians to intimately know each other as a member of one church family and the New Testament frequently instructs Christians on how to relate to one another (Freeze and Di Tommaso 2015). The essence of this is captured in John 13:34, stating: ‘a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you’. Yet Kaufman (1981) highlighted the reality that human beings are fallible and consequently some congregations have fallen away from the *koinonia* ideal and as a result have failed to provide a safe haven and a secure base to those in need.

Therefore, whilst inclusion is a good start, Swinton (2012) calls for a practical theology of belonging, reflecting the notion of the body of Christ; a place where one knows that they belong. Experiences of belonging to the church family were disrupted by matters of race and class (Sharma 2012). Even so, intimate and meaningful practices and interactions were experienced by many in Sharma’s research. Indicators of such belonging are that communities feel empty when an individual is not there, since only when absence stimulates feelings of emptiness it is known that one truly belongs (Swinton 2012). Underpinning this ethos and sense of feeling, Bonhoeffer (2007) encouraged spiritual love rather than self-centred love, enabling individuals to love one another despite many differences being present (Swinton 2012). With this in mind, Hall (2005) argued that the task of the church is not world transformation but advancing the Kingdom of God through small gestures. Such a focus on building healthy relationships within the church ultimately helps individuals to experience greater well-being, in addition to fulfilling the command to ‘love one another’. It is these perceptions and actions which will now be examined with reference to examining belonging of home educators within the Christian community.

Methodology

This project adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of Christian home educators in the UK, uncovering participant’s original experience without a priori, before later theorising about their experiences (Giles, Smythe, and Spence 2012). Initial analysis of the data adopted thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clark (2006), so that initial codes were generated to capture the full expression of participant’s experience. These initial codes were then clustered into themes identified in the data. This enabled a hermeneutic phenomenological understanding of the perceptions and experiences of respondents. Subsequently, these themes were compared with the parameters of a theology of belonging (Swinton 2012) in order to examine the perceptions of the place of home educators in the Christian community.

As cited above, we had heard anecdotally that the Schools Bill had elicited considerable concern amongst Christian home educators, leading to much suspicion and mistrust of external organisations and authorities. Since the research team were employed by a state university, there was concern that this may lead to barriers of participation. Upon consulting some organisations who support Christian home-educating families, it was clear that at the time of investigation Christian home educators were hesitant to speak freely about their concerns, for fear of how the legislation and home education register may play out. For this reason, it was deemed that data collection needed to take place anonymously in order to provide reassurance to participants that their responses would be confidential and anonymous. Hence, data were collected using an online survey to allow anonymity of participation, although there were many open-ended questions which enabled participants to share their experiences and perceptions fulsomely. The survey was constructed and disseminated in collaboration with some networks of UK Christian home educators, prompted by their desire to examine the lived experiences of this sector. The online survey was open for a month and captured 462 responses. Aside from residing in the UK, the demographics of the participants are unknown as this data were not collected to reassure the respondents of their anonymity and facilitate their open and honest responses. However, 75% stated that their faith played a major role in their choice to home-educate, whilst 16% described it as a minor consideration, and 7% reported that it was no influence and 2% were not sure.

The survey questions prompted participants to provide both a multiple-choice answer and open-ended response to each of these questions: how do you think Christian home educators are viewed by wider society?, what has been your experience of relationships Christian home educators have with the wider Christian community? and what has been your experience of relationships Christian home educators have with the local church? In addition, they were asked what support they would like to see from the Christian community? The open-ended questions provided an unlimited space for responses, facilitating very fulsome depictions and expressions to be submitted by participants. This project was subject to the ethical scrutiny of ANON and particular care was taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants due to the nature of the questions being asked. The anonymity was deemed very important to reassure participants and enable them to answer more freely and openly.

Results

Participant perceptions about wider society

Figure 1 shows that 52% of participants perceived that Christian home educators were viewed negatively by wider society, whilst only 5% felt that they were viewed positively,

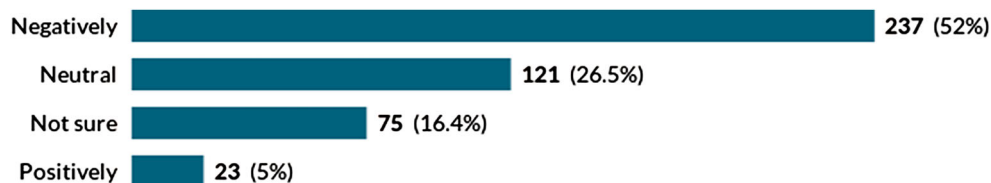


Figure 1. How do you think Christian home educators are viewed by wider society?

and 43% were unsure or neutral in this regard. Of the open-ended responses, 60% were negative, with 27% of these participants stating negative feelings such as 'viewed negatively', 'don't feel welcome', 'weirdos', 'mocked', 'outsiders', 'misunderstood' or 'judged', whilst 11% expressed discriminatory or judgmental views such as 'hated on', 'suspicious', 'intolerant', 'extremists', 'negligent', 'radical' 'cult', 'bigoted', or 'fundamentalists' and 11% explained comments regarding their approach such as it being viewed as 'brainwashing', 'controlling', 'overprotection', and 'indoctrinating'. The remainder of these negative responses were regarding the media or government portrayal of home education as being 'negative', 'creating misunderstanding', 'enforcing political correctness', 'contradictory', and 'incorrectly represented'. Twenty-four per cent of the open-ended comments were neutral or unsure, whilst 15% were positive, stating experiences such as 'interested', 'sympathetic', 'supportive', 'understanding', and 'viewed as more normal since Covid'.

Participant perceptions about the wider Christian community

Figure 2 reveals that 38% of respondents felt that the wider Christian community was supportive of Christian home educators, and 17% felt that it was unsupportive. Alongside this, 46% were not sure or neutral. Of the open-ended responses, 32% were unsure or neutral and 33% positive, with a further 5% stating that their experiences and perceptions were 'getting better'. Of these positive responses, there were varying degrees of support with some describing the support as 'superficial' and others stating it was 'extremely supportive'. A small number of these comments expressed feeling 'respected', 'accepted', and 'welcomed', although some indicated that the support wasn't unanimous commenting 'mostly supporting', or 'largely supporting'.

Thirty per cent of the open-ended responses were negative, with respondents detailing wrong assumptions such as 'children being abused', 'wrongly educated', and 'uninformed'. Others expressed that they felt 'unsupported', 'misunderstood', 'uncomfortable', 'judged', or 'threatened'. Some felt isolated from the wider Christian community and others perceived that the wider Christian community had biased, disapproving, judgmental, suspicious, and critical views of them, with one participant stating that they had opposing views.

Participant perceptions about the local church

Figure 3 shows that 44% of participants felt that the local church was supportive of Christian home educators, although 13% felt that it was unsupportive, whilst 44% were unsure or neutral. Of the open-ended responses, 49% described positive or improved experiences, with many comments about feeling 'supported', 'accepted', or 'positive'. Some said they

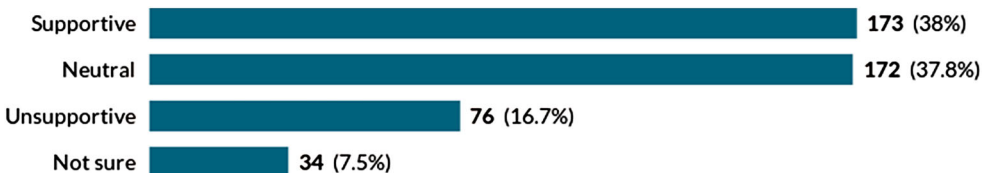


Figure 2. What's been your experience of relationships Christian home educators have with the wider Christian community?

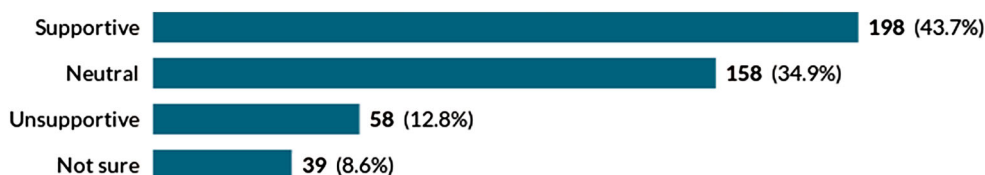


Figure 3. What's been your experience of relationships Christian home educators have with the local church?

felt respected and one said that the church allowed them to use the church facilities. Two stood out as notably positive: 'people admire it' and 'the church are big advocates'. Many of the positive responses indicated that there had been a recent change, such as 'my new vicar is much more supportive', 'we moved churches and now feel more supported', 'originally viewed negatively but now are supported', and 'more supportive after lockdown'.

Twenty-two per cent of the open-ended responses were negative, and very markedly so, with comments such as: 'church is disinterested', 'limited interaction', 'no support', 'most at church disagree', 'they don't understand or approve', 'critical', and 'there is an inherent conflict'. Two per cent of the open-ended comments expressed that they were unsure because either they were not part of a church or they had never had a conversation about it, which indicates peripheral engagement with the church community. A further 22% gave neutral comments such as: 'mixed responses', 'good and bad reactions', and 'it varies by church'.

Support desired from the Christian community

The overwhelmingly most common response (41%) when asked what support they desired from the Christian community was approval, with comments such as: 'acceptance', 'approval', 'treated equally', 'understanding', 'recognition', 'kindness, respect and compassion', 'to embrace home education', 'an understanding heart', and 'to feel like home ed is a valid choice'. Many of these responses conveyed strong emotions and a keen desire for connection, such as: 'general friendliness', 'fellowship', 'community and togetherness', and 'provide more of a "village" to support'.

Others (30%) focussed upon the church structures or pastors and called for more activities, advocacy, facilitating of a group, financial support and many called for theological teaching on Biblical parenting. Many of these would appreciate using the church's building and/or facilities. Many of these respondents expressed a desire for the church to organise or facilitate gatherings, socials, and meet-ups specifically for home educators, and one said 'groups to grow friendships'. The underlying desire in many of these responses were around the desire for relationship-building opportunities, with other home educators, but also more widely within the Christian community and beyond. Some expressed that within this it would be beneficial to 'pool resources and talents'.

Ten per cent of the respondents simply wanted prayer support, whilst 8% desired their church to engage in more reflection and critique around schooling and to become involved politically, particularly to campaign against the proposed Schools Bill. Of the remaining open-ended responses, 7% said that they did not need any further support and 4% said that they were unsure or there was 'nothing specific'.

Discussion

Overarching themes related to theology of belonging

It is striking to read the responses as the vast majority express very strong emotions surrounding their experiences. Across the board, there are some very marked lived experiences reported by these participants, a significant proportion of which are negative. The strong language about being perceived as a weirdo, outsider, abuser, radical, or extremist all convey very judgmental attitudes these parents have felt from those outside of home educating circles, and do not align with the theological implications and embodiment of the 'body of Christ' (1 Corinthians 12) or embodied ways of engaging in communities and related to others (Lelievre and Marshall 2015). Reports of feeling threatened, mocked, 'hated on', or judged all convey a sense of these negative feelings and mindsets not being hidden or subconscious, but rather attitudes and behaviours which are expressed openly towards the home educators. These approaches call into question who sets the parameters on what the norms are and to what extent are these discourses supported, reinforced, or challenged by the local church and wider Christian community? Whether subconscious or intentional, establishment of these norms reveals a deep need for truly noticing and listening to individual's identities, needs, and preferences within all parties of a community (Carey 2011; Tøssebro et al. 2012). This emphasises the complex inter-connectedness of communal relationships of this nature as part of everyday experiences (Palmer 1997), and the need for the Christian community to be alert to the disparate experiences occurring.

Indeed, respondents also include very negative recollections regarding how their parenting approaches are perceived, such as being controlling, overprotective, restricting children's choices, and brainwashing. Flowing from this, there are significant feelings of being misunderstood, with the participants keen to explain their viewpoint and approach to those around them. These discontinuities undermine a theological understanding and construction of belonging (Swinton 2012). Participants often indicated a sense of disappointment at feeling misunderstood or marginalised by the church, since they state that they are following Biblical principles by home-educating their children, so express bafflement that the Christian community do not support them more fully in their quest. This contrasts greatly with the notion of collective connectedness within church communities, whereby people enjoy a shared sense of purpose (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). This disbelief and disappointment seem to stem from feeling that their family's approaches to education have biblical origins, and therefore should be understood alongside those of the same faith convictions due to a presumed match of beliefs and values related to the Christian faith tradition. Where these home educators therefore feel affronted due to this lack of understanding, it is resulting in them not feeling a sense of connection with their faith community, which Bennett (1997) asserts as being a basic need of humanity. Alongside this, there is distinct disappointment of church leaders and structures reported, as many felt that they should be incorporating a stronger sense of the calling and responsibility of Christian parents to be the primary disciplers and educators of their child. This all leads to participants reporting that they feel marginalised, and are often engaged with the Christian community only at a superficial level. Hence, their strong desire to feel approved of, accepted, and welcomed by their local church,

along the lines of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12), regardless of the differences present as encouraged by the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28.

There are some who say that they feel supported but few of these respondents have elaborated on the nature of that support, indicating that perhaps it is a feeling or ethos of support rather than tangible and practical ways. Those who have provided good experiences convey a sense of feeling supported, approved of and even feel the church are advocate for them. These positive experiences are what many respondents strive for, based on what they state they would like from the local church. Many express desires to have relational connection both within and facilitated by the church, to have prayer support and a sense that the church is a village standing alongside them to support them in their endeavours as Christian parents. These positive experiences concur with the notion of Hellerman (2009) that viewing the church as family, in a collective and relational sense, enables individuals to grow and thrive together. Many of the open-ended responses contained evidence that positive experiences of feeling connected relationally within the local church have resulted in participants feeling a sense of wholesome and healthy flourishing. It is key that these positive vantages and encounters are deeply rooted and not tokenistic or half-hearted in order to foster a genuine sense of inclusion and participation (Swinton 2012).

Comparing perceptions of wider society, wider Christian community and local church

Figures 1, 2, and 3 highlight that participants felt that they were viewed more positively by the wider Christian community than by wider society in general, and they felt more supported by the local church than they did by the wider Christian community. The open-ended responses show the same trend. There are also clear differences in the nature of the open-ended responses regarding the different sectors. The language used to explain the nature of negative experiences in wider society is very strongly emotive and reports extremely negative perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. However, the responses regarding wider Christian society less strong and are more aligned with underlying ethos and assumptions, and the open responses regarding the local church were further less pronounced, and described feeling superficially involved and lack of interest. Since this project only investigated from the perspective of home-educating parents, it is not possible to assess the accuracy of these feelings, namely what the feelings, attitudes, and behaviours are of the local church, Christian community, or wider society. However, there is an indication that where personal relations exist (within the local church), there may be slightly more positive experiences than the more remote interactions and discourses of wider society. Other research has illuminated similar experiences of home educators being viewed as distinct, strange, and somewhat of an oddity of society (Lubienski 2003; Morton 2010). Indeed, in some sectors of society, there has been a feeling of wider society almost invalidating their identities (McCormick and Barthelemy 2021). The notion of difference intimates that there are normal and abnormal human beings (Swinton 2012) makes the point that norms tend to be consensual as well as statistical, namely decided by the majority. It is therefore key for organisations within the Christian community to adopt intentional and transformative inclusion to facilitate a sense of genuine belonging (Coleman 2022). Indeed, it appears that the

stronger sense of relationship felt by being present in the local church rather than merely connected with wider Christian community or society generally, enables improved understanding and inclusion. This may reflect the observation of Swinton (2012), that Christian communities of belonging are not merely the outcome of political processes, but rather a reflection of the love of Jesus being an underpinning dimension rather than merely a degree of justice and inclusion. Therefore, efforts focussed on removing misunderstandings and improving communication within the local church would be highly beneficial, and may subsequently filter out more widely.

Desires and aspirations of Christian home educators

The support desired by respondents from the Christian community all connected with approval and acceptance, reinforcing all of the points made above about inclusion and belonging being a distinct and heart-felt need (Basok and George 2021). Beyond this, there was a deep desire for 'koinonia' (Freeze and Di Tommaso 2015) and spiritual love (Bonhoeffer 2007) amongst the church community. It seemed particularly important to the Christian home educators that the Christian community grasped that they were carrying out this philosophy based on biblical principles, acknowledging that parents are primarily responsible for their child's education and upbringing (Ginty 2022; Wolterstorff 1980). Others expressed other desires, which were primarily prayerful and practical support, which seem to be secondary issues flowing from the deeper need for a sense of acceptance and belonging. A greater sense of being able to depend on their church family may result in higher levels of spiritual and emotional well-being for these home educators (Freeze and Di Tommaso 2015; Krause 2006). Endeavours to this end could bring about transformation, which Hall (2005) called for to bring about healthy relationships within the church and a subsequent greater sense of well-being.

Limitations and future research opportunities

In order to provide a fuller understanding of this topic, it would have been beneficial to have carried out a similar study within local churches and the wider Christian community to ask them about their perceptions of Christian home educators. This would be an interesting area for future work, although care would need to be taken to ensure good ethical practice since it may raise emotive responses amongst potential respondents which could be detrimental to their relations with Christian home educators. Furthermore, respondents to an online survey may not always be conscious of their attitudes and behaviour towards Christian home educators and may express their perceptions more positively than reality indicates due to the pressure to appear polite when completing the survey. Nevertheless, this would be an interesting area for future research. Indeed, Ray (2017) emphasised that more research is needed into the religious preferences and political affiliations of home educators. Equally, this survey did not capture the lived experiences and perceptions of children who were home-educated or knew children who were. This would provide a different perspective and it would be interesting to explore the extent to which children's perceptions and behaviours in this regard were similar or different to those of their parents.

Conclusion

The lived experiences examined in this paper depict many negative, openly judgmental and marginalising experiences for these Christian home educators. Reflection is needed on the norms and identities of communal relationships within the local church, broader Christian community, and wider society, with an intentional goal of being more inclusive, truly fostering participation and better reflecting the notion of the 'body of Christ', with the Christian religion aspires to. Misunderstandings, marginalisation, and disappointments mark many of the experiences reported by Christian home educators, all undermining a genuine sense of belonging. Increased dialogue between church leaders and indeed the Christian community generally with home educators would serve to counter these misunderstandings and aid fruitful collaborations and a shared sense of purpose. The positive features reported by some of the participants could form the basis of recommendations for churches. This is that these Christian home educators communicated that support for them equates to approval and acceptance within the church and Christian community, relating to a desire for *koinonia* and spiritual love. Some also expressed desire for advocacy. It is clear that relational connections to underpin this are key, with many also desiring prayer support from their church in their role as home educators and also a sense of desire for the church to serve as a village standing alongside them to support them in their endeavours as Christian parents.

As authors involved professionally in these sectors as well as for research purposes, it is concerning to read of the strong negative experiences and feelings of these Christian home educators, particularly their sense of not feeling included and 'approved of' within the Christian community. It is clear that dialogue between the two sectors would serve as an excellent starting point to illuminate and address this. Coleman (2022) stated that the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic had served as an opportunity to move away from the idea of a 'new normal' to a new different, since the notion of a 'new different' acknowledges that the 'normal' was often challenging for many. Hence, it is recommended that local churches and wider Christian society adopt this transformative mindset, and seek to facilitate a 'new different' which is more genuinely inclusive and enables Christian home educators to feel a greater sense of belonging as part of Christian community as they continue of their endeavours of raising their children within the Christian faith.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to these organisations for disseminating our research invitation: CHESS, Christian Education Teach, Christian Home Ed UK, Christian Education (UK and Europe), Classical Conversations. Thanks also to Bonnie Smith for carrying out much of the data analysis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Sarah Holmes is Lecturer in the School of Education at Liverpool Hope University and Director of Research at The CYM Institute of Children, Youth and Mission. Her research interests include the faith and spirituality of children, faith in families and spiritual and holistic wellbeing.

Harriet Pattison is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Liverpool Hope University and her research interests include alternative education, informal learning, constructions of childhood and parenthood and higher education.

ORCID

Sarah E. Holmes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5475-0072>

References

- Adejumo, V. 2021. "Beyond Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging." *Leadership* 17 (1): 62–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020976202>
- Association of Directors of Children's Services. 2021. *Elective Home Education Survey*. https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_EHE_Survey_2021_Report_FINAL.pdf.
- Basok, T., and G. George. 2021. "'We are Part of This Place, But I Do Not Think I Belong.' Temporariness, Social Inclusion and Belonging among Migrant Farmworkers in Southwestern Ontario." *International Migration* 59 (5): 99–112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12804>
- Bellamy, J., S. King, J. Taylor, M. Griffiths, A. Hampshire, P. Saunders, and Y. Naidoo. 2007. "Towards New Indicators of Disadvantage: Material Deprivation and Social Exclusion in Australia." https://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/6119/1/Saunders_etal_towards_new_indicators_of_disadvantage_deprivation_and_social_exclusion.pdf.
- Bennett, J. B. 1997. "The Academy, Individualism, and the Common Good." *Liberal Education* 83 (4): 16–24.
- Bonhoeffer, D. 2007. *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101.
- Cacioppo, J. T., and W. Patrick. 2008. *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. New York City: WW Norton & Company.
- Carey, A. C. 2011. "The Quest for Community: Intellectual Disability and the Shifting Meaning of Community in Activism." *Research in Social Science and Disability* 6:198–213.
- Coleman, L. 2022. "Global Inclusion, Diversity, Belonging, Equity, and Access-GIDBEA. The Architecture of a New Different." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 13 (25): 91–103. <https://doi.org/10.7336/academicus.2022.25.06>
- Dougherty, K. D., and A. L. Whitehead. 2011. "A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations." *Sociology of Religion* 72 (1): 91–111. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srq067>
- Esses, V. M., L. K. Hamilton, C. Bennett-AbuAyyash, and M. Burstein. 2010. "Characteristics of a Welcoming Community." <http://p2pcanada.ca/library/characteristics-of-a-welcoming-community-report/>.
- Fangen, K., T. Johansson, and N. Hammaren. 2012. *Young Migrants: Exclusion and Belonging in Europe*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Freeze, T. A., and E. Di Tommaso. 2015. "Attachment to God and Church Family: Predictors of Spiritual and Psychological Well-Being." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 34 (1): 60.
- Giles, D., E. Smythe, and D. Spence. 2012. "Exploring Relationships in Education: A Phenomenological Inquiry." *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 52 (2): 214–236.
- Ginty, B. L. 2022. "Organizational Original Design: Parental Responsibility for Christian Education and Faith Development in the Home." *Journal of Organizational and Educational Leadership* 8 (1): 2.
- Hall, A. L. 2005. "Public Bioethics and the Gratitude of Life: Joanna Jepson's Witness Against Negative Eugenics." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18 (1): 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946805052114>
- Hawkey, L. C., M. W. Browne, and J. T. Cacioppo. 2005. "How Can I Connect with Thee? Let Me Count the Ways." *Psychological Science* 16 (10): 798–804. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2005.01617.x>
- Hellerman, J. H. 2009. *When the Church was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group.

- Howell, D. B. 2015. *Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Study in the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Kaufman, G. D. 1981. *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster.
- Krause, N. 2006. "Church-based Social Support and Change in Health Over Time." *Review of Religious Research* 125–140.
- Kunzman, R. 2010. "Homeschooling and Religious Fundamentalism." *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education* 3 (1): 17–28.
- Lelievre, M., and M. Marshall. 2015. "'Because Life Itself is But Motion': Toward an Anthropology of Mobility." *Anthropological Theory* 15 (4): 434–471. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499615605221>
- Lubienski, C. 2003. "A Critical View of Home Education." *Evaluation & Research in Education* 17 (2–3): 167–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500790308668300>
- May, V. 2013. *Connecting Self to Society: Belonging in a Changing World*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- McCormick, M., and R. S. Barthelemy. 2021. "Excluded from 'Inclusive' Communities: LGBTQ Youths' Perception of 'Their' Community." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 33 (1): 103–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2020.1850386>
- Meyer, John P., and Natalie J. Allen. 1997. *Commitment in the Workplace: Theory, Research, and Application*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morton, R. 2010. "Home Education: Constructions of Choice." *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education* 3 (1): 45–56.
- Palmer, P. J. 1997. "The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching." *Change* 29 (6): 14–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091389709602343>
- Pattison, H. 2020. "Muslim Home Educators in the Time of Prevent." *International Review of Qualitative Research* 13 (1): 41–63.
- Ray, B. D. 2017. "A Systematic Review of the Empirical Research on Selected Aspects of Homeschooling as a School Choice." *Journal of School Choice* 11 (4): 604–621. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2017.1395638>
- Sharma, S. 2012. "The Church is... My Family': Exploring the Interrelationship Between Familial and Religious Practices and Spaces." *Environment and Planning A* 44 (4): 816–831.
- Swinton, J. 2012. "From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness." *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 16 (2): 172–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2012.676243>
- Tøssebro, J., I. S. Bonfils, A. Teittinen, M. Tideman, R. Traustadóttir, and H. T. Vesala. 2012. "Normalization Fifty Years Beyond – Current Trends in the Nordic Countries." *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 9 (2): 134–146. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-1130.2012.00340.x>
- Wilhelm, G. M., and M. W. Firmin. 2009. "Historical and Contemporary Developments in Home School Education." *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 18 (3): 303–315.
- Wolterstorff, N. 1980. *Educating for Responsible Action*. CSI Publications.
- Wu, S., S. Ellingson, P. Hagstrom, and J. Kucinkas. 2021. "Religion and Refugee Well-Being: The Importance of Inclusive Community." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 60 (2): 291–308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12702>