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Invisible pedagogies in home education: Freedom, power and control

Amber Joy Fensham-Smith

Abstract: Home-schooling, or ‘elective home education’ (EHE) as it is more commonly known in the UK, invites contestation and controversies. Drawing on a UK-wide study of 242 families this paper explores a collection of EHE pedagogic practices within the socially situated contexts of doing everyday life. Through an application of Bernsteinian ideas, the findings surface some of the ways in which invisible pedagogies afforded children greater autonomy over the sequence and pace over their learning. It also considers how community development has helped some parents to harness the forms of capital which extend and remake new structures to strengthen the transmission of their social values. Contrary to the messages of EHE advocates, it shows that approaches inspired by unschooling are not devoid of power and control altogether. In considering the experiences of children and young people, the findings highlight the relative challenges and opportunities of transitioning from invisible pedagogies to formal qualifications in a context where access to public examinations can be difficult to achieve. Considering the tensions that these pedagogies reveal in the socialisation towards individualism, the author suggests solutions for questioning, challenging and bridging divides.

Key words: elective home education, home-schooling, invisible pedagogies, unschooling

UK Context

The contemporary context of ‘school-assisted learning at home’, or what could be called ‘pandemic disrupted education’ has reignited interest in home-based learning. The rapid deluge of self-help blogs, online courses and dedicated ‘how to’ resource for supporting home-schooling provides

a richer landscape for the study of pedagogic practices within and around the home.

However, despite early optimisms, the pre-existing structural inequalities have enabled some learners to access, adapt to, and sustain their social and emotional wellbeing during this period, while disadvantaging others, is only beginning to be understood.

For the parents in the UK who poses the resources needed to continue educating their children within and around the home, under *S7 of the 1996 Education Act*, there is the legal and viable option of Elective Home Education¹ (EHE). Unlike the regulative frameworks in other countries, families who pursue EHE in this context are not obliged to follow a national, or any formal, curriculum, nor is there a requirement to sit public examinations. This EHE context gives parents significant autonomy to personalise what a *suitable* and *efficient* education might look like for their child/children².

It is generally assumed that the UK EHE population is now a small but growing heterogeneous collection of families (Lees & Nicholson, 2017). The Association of Directors for Children's Services have observed an annual increase since they began collecting data in 2016. In 2020, an estimated 86,335 children were thought to receive EHE in England (ADCS, 2020). In the absence of a statutory registration system, the exact number of children who receive EHE is unknown.

It is difficult to empirically substantiate how this population may have changed over time when only one statistically representative quantitative study exists (Smith & Nelson, 2015). Across the patchwork of data available, a noticeable trend is in the increased number of families who are accessing EHE as 'last resort' because of issues linked to the provision of special educational needs, declining mental health and wellbeing and bullying in state-maintained schools (Morton, 2010; Parsons & Lewis, 2010). More recently, Covid-19 and the fear of transmission via schools is thought to have played a role in parental motivations and a spike of 10% from the previous year (ADCS, 2020).

¹ The definitions of home-schooling, unschooling, and even EHE are contested. While I recognise the limitations associated with all these terms, in this paper I use the term EHE broadly to differentiate its study in the UK context.

² Apart from the small and discretionary subsidies offered by a few local councils, there is no state-funded support towards costs associated with this provision across the UK.

Prior to the pandemic, EHE was a small, yet internationally researched global trend. Most scholarship comes from the US, where motivations and familial characteristics are thought to differ from the UK context (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020). Evidentially, much of what does exist provides a very Western-centric view.

An ongoing debate within the field is the extent to which the wider growth of EHE might be in response to school choice, diversity and marketisation (Ball, 2016). How then might the pedagogic practices of EHE be disrupting, subverting, and/or reproducing this neoliberal project? While this is not a new consideration, it is one that foregrounds this paper (Aurini & Davies, 2005). The context of pandemic disrupted education provides an opportunity to re-examine what EHE might be and its social function across disparate contexts.

Though several contributions have extended the field in the last 10 years, the role and influence of partisanship in this arena has created what others have described as a communicative impasse, wherein EHE is simultaneously positioned as both 'better', 'worse' and also 'different' to a schooled education (Pattison, 2015). A key area where polarised 'better' or 'worse' readings of EHE seems to persist is in relation to freedom, power, and control. Some impassioned advocates argue that EHE has the propensity to liberate learners from the kinds of organisational and power structures thought to exist in schools. It follows that in some ways of 'doing' EHE, there is no power or control, only freedom.

To move the field forward, this study explores the alternative structures and pedagogic transmissions that might be created and sustained in EHE contexts where there isn't necessarily an explicit 'formal' curriculum and 'doing' EHE occurs within the social and cultural contexts of certain kinds of networks and communities. In surfacing points of tension, contradiction, and paradox, it aims to raise further questions and solutions to bridge divides.

The study of pedagogic practices in EHE necessitates framing how some of the styles, methods and approaches used have been previously conceptualised. While the empirical context in focus here is the UK, the proceeding discussion draws on the wider international research base.

EHE Methods, Styles and Approaches

A broad constellation of philosophies, styles and approaches have historically influenced the growth of EHE in the UK since the 1970s. Many of these hold moorings in the ideas of progressive educationalist thinkers and child-centred pedagogues. Unschooling³, child-led, self-directed, informal, and autonomous inspired approaches are said to have grown in popularity among some factions of the UK EHE population. It is unknown how many families utilise, some, or all of the ideas to inform their EHE approach (Rothermel, 2015).

Unschooling, originally popularised by John Holt (1977), has received more research attention in the US. It is typically framed as a radical ‘disrupter’ method that cultivates freedom and self-determination in the learner, unknowingly. As Gray and Riley (2013) illustrate:

[U]nschooling is a variation of home schooling where instead of following a set curriculum, children learn through everyday experiences. These experiences are of their own choosing and are not curriculum or lesson dependent. Within the unschooling environment, children learn through their everyday experiences and are in control of their own education. It is the ultimate form of self-determined, intrinsically motivated learning. (p. 22)

The authors use Self-Determination and Cognitive Evaluation Theory to explain how the conditions of: 1) competence, 2) autonomy and 3) relatedness lead to the self-reported mastery and confidence in unschooled young people (Riley, 2016; Riley & Gray, 2013). In this approach, parents are facilitators who provide learners with ‘autonomy support’. Responding to children’s needs and interests and extending opportunities for self-regulated learning in everyday life is therefore the primary goal of the unschooled parent. Through this lens, the autonomy support process is understood as a value free exchange that organically occurs between the parent and the child. In conceptualising learning as a process to be chiefly managed via the self-regulative actions of the EHE child, problematically removes the significance and relevance of the cultural biographies and structural inequalities that enable, extend, restrict and/or maintain learner agency.

³ Play-based learning, experiential learning, and project-based learning form part of this EHE approach.

In the absence of a formal curriculum together with increased learner autonomy, unschooling is often referred to as an ‘unstructured’ EHE style. To compare different EHE styles, taxonomies are often drawn between: ‘structured’ vs. ‘unstructured’, ‘informal’ vs. ‘formal’; ‘child-initiated’ vs. ‘parent-led’. Some of these taxonomies differentiate primarily based on instructional styles, curricula types used, parental motivations and/or intra-familial characteristics. Yet, the styles, methods, and approaches used in EHE are not always fixed and can change depending on whether the practice is a temporary, medium, or long-term choice (Rothermel, 2013).

Neuman and Guterman (2017) proposed that we should view structure in EHE styles as a broader continuum. Drawing on their findings from a study with 30 EHE mothers in Israel, they suggested that a more precise mapping of structure can be achieved by considering the separate dimensions of “structure in the content of learning and the degree of structure in the learning process” (p.356). Here the conceptualisation of *content* and *process* still renders it challenging to identify the existence of structure in forms of EHE where *content* (pre-planned curricula/discrete activities) and *process* (the degree of control between parent and child in learning process) are not explicit. Equally, there is an opportunity to explore EHE styles, methods, and approaches as practiced at a *meso* level within the context of grassroots communities and networks.

EHE beyond the Home

An important dimension of analysis that is missing from previous readings of learner autonomy, control and the structuring of *content* and *process*, is the role and influence of the holistic cultural and social contexts that can mediate experiences of learning from everyday life.

Notably, online support networks and offline familial community groups in EHE have expanded in popularity in the UK and internationally (Morrison, 2021). Some of these EHE networks and communities have dedicated websites, the majority are now housed across various social media platforms such as Facebook. This has afforded some EHE parents and their children with the capacity to network themselves locally, regionally, nationally, and globally in what has been called a ‘landscape of practice’ (Fensham-Smith, 2019; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). The metaphor of a landscape of practice moved beyond exploring the study of singular, predominantly offline EHE groups, towards understanding the boundaries and compositions of a broad constellation of group types and their structures. Fensham-Smith (2019)

found that negotiating access to some of the groups both online and offline, necessitated high levels of social and cultural capital. Thus, becoming 'a legitimate member' was a complex achievement.

Safran (2010) found that some of individual offline EHE community groups resembled more formal communities of practice, meeting regularly with a distinct ethos and group identity and shared community agreement. Others were much looser in terms of familial commitment and extra-curricular activities offered (Safran, 2010; Wenger, 1998). For some EHE learners in 'normal times', this means that their programme of learning can happen in a range of spaces and places within and beyond the home (e.g. community centres, museums, parks, cafes) alongside other likeminded EHE families.

To consider the *meso* level structures that might exist because of learning in these intra-familial community contexts, the idea of a cultural curriculum in EHE has been posed. Pattison and Thomas (2016) describe the cultural curriculum as a hybrid between a kind of non-formal and hidden curriculum. They suggest that the cultural curriculum:

[C]onsists of the values, structures and beliefs that order our way of life and give rise to the routines, conventions, and practices that direct, arrange and control our day-to-day existence and our day-to-day understanding of that existence. Subject matter, which may or may not fall into the designated areas of school curriculum, is learned through direct engagement with the practices of everyday life. (p.137)

Pattison and Thomas (2016) go on to explain that:

The relationship that the cultural curriculum postulates is of quite a different order to that intimated by the formal curriculum, and it is this difference that creates the stark contrast between the practices of autonomous home education and its counterpart in schools. (p.142)

While the existence of values, beliefs and new structures have been hinted at, it is unknown how these processes might work in these contexts (Wenger, 2008). Rather than seeking to build further individuated curriculum types, or an even greater range of typologies to explain these structures, a set of useful inter-related tools for exploring the making and ordering of social structures can be found in the existing work of Sociologist Basil Bernstein.

Invisible Pedagogies

Bernsteinian (1975a; 1975b; 1990) ideas offer fertile ground for exploring the contexts and social structures that are varied, tacit and difficult to identify in EHE. His work on code theory, and later the pedagogic device, focused on the underlying organisational processes, structures, principles and processes used generate, relay and recontextualise knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). In so doing, his work gives insight into how education systems reproduce structural relations of inequality.

Critical of the early progressive education movement, Bernstein studied a range of institutional contexts, including preschool/infant education and 'traditional' school settings. To compare the principles of organisation across different contexts, he developed the concepts of *classification* and *frame* (Bernstein, 1975a). "Classification refers to the strength of boundaries between different knowledge categories and framing refers to the degree of control of the transmission of knowledge" (Power et al., 2019, p.6). Within 'framing', the interrelated terms *sequence* (in what order) and *pace* (when) are helpful for exploring autonomy support in EHE.

Building on this work, he distinguished between two contrasting pedagogy types, *visible* and *invisible*. For Bernstein, a traditional school setting might present an idealised context for the expression *visible* pedagogies. While pre-school/infant education, might instead provide a context for *invisible* pedagogies. Bernstein (1975b) outlined six key features of invisible pedagogies:

1. Where the control of the teacher over the child is implicit rather than explicit.
2. Where, ideally, the teacher arranges the context which the child is expected to rearrange and explore.
3. Where within this arranged content the child apparently has wider powers over what [they] select, over how [they] structure, and over the timescale of [their] activities.
4. Where the child apparently regulates [their] own movements and social relationships.
5. Where there is a reduced emphasis upon the transmission and acquisition of specific skills [Note I removed].
6. Where the criteria for evaluating the pedagogy are multiple and diffuse and so not easily measured. (p.9)

Where subjects in a ‘traditional’ school setting are explicitly defined and delivered in a carefully timetabled and tightly regulated format, learners might have little control over *what* and *when* they learn. These are just some of the ways in which visible pedagogies have *strong* classifications and *strong* frames (Bernstein, 1975b). In contrast, the sequence and pace via which learners engage in educational activities are more fluid and loosely defined in invisible types. Invisible pedagogies are therefore characterised by *weak* classification and *weak* frames (Bernstein, 1975b).

Another feature that separates *invisible* from *visible* pedagogies, is the relationship between the educator (transmitter) and the learner (acquirer). In *invisible* pedagogies, social hierarchies are not explicitly defined, with teachers positioned as facilitators rather than instructors. Instead: “[t]he status of teachers from this point of view is based upon diffuse, tacit, symbolic control which is legitimised by a closed explicit ideology” (Bernstein, 1975b, p.12).

Importantly, Bernstein (1975b) argued that invisible pedagogies were not devoid of power and control. In *invisible* pedagogies, surveillance takes place through implicit, rather than explicit processes. Play is one area of high visibility for facilitators. As a form of business and ‘doing’, it enables facilitators to make ongoing inferences about the developmental stage of the child, or ‘readiness’. Watching, or screening, a child’s play is therefore an important component in the *evaluation techniques* available to the facilitator. Thus, “a non-doing child in the invisible pedagogy is the equivalent of a nonreading child in the visible” (p.10). This in turn, can give rise to a form of tacit, but ongoing symbolic control wherein the learner self-polices their behaviour in response to not explicitly knowing when this expression will be evaluated by the facilitator (transmitter). For these reasons, he positioned invisible pedagogy as an interrupter system that “transforms the privatised social structures and cultural contexts of visible pedagogies into personalised social structure and personalised cultural contexts” (p.13).

Though perhaps not an application that Bernstein himself originally envisaged, invisible pedagogies have renewed value for the *meso* study of EHE approaches and methods that blur boundaries between a range of private and public, formal, informal, non-formal education spaces and curriculum types (Kraftl, 2013).

Methods

To explore these ideas further, this paper draws on a key set of findings from a pre-pandemic, UK wide mixed-methods⁴ study of the place, use and purpose of online networks and communities in UK EHE (Fensham-Smith, 2017). One of the core research questions was to consider how and in what ways participation in networks and communities enabled and sustained the pedagogic practices of EHE families.

Given the absence of representative demographic data, and the difficulties associated with accessing a group deemed ‘hard to reach’, a combination of purpose and convenience sampling techniques were used⁵. Ethical considerations including negotiating access, trust, informed consent/assent, confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity played an important and ongoing role through-out the research process (BERA, 2018).

The layered and sequential research design included semi-structured interviews with parents (predominantly EHE mothers), families, children and young people and participant observation. Interviews took place in a range of settings including homes, community centres, village halls, cafés, and a field, as part of a large camping festival with EHE families⁶. Table 1 presents and overview of the sample:

Table 1 Sample overview

Phase	Cohort	Method	Sample population
1	Home-educators (England Scotland & Wales)	Online survey	242 responses; with a total of 607 children
2	Online moderators ⁷ (England, Wales & Scotland)	Semi-structured interviews: 1-1	12 semi-structured interviews: all mothers
3	Families (England, Wales & Scotland)	Semi-structured interviews: 1-1 & group	32 semi-structured interviews; with families & mothers
4	Home-educated young people (England)	Participant observation & informal group interviews	8 informal interviews; 23 young people aged: 14-20years.

⁴ The approach to ‘mixing’ methods was qualitatively driven (Mason, 2006)

⁵ The online survey was used to recruit the sample populations for the subsequent phases of research.

⁶ Data was collected across a 4-month period in 2013.

⁷ Most online moderators were longstanding EHE mothers who were responsible for ‘managing’/gatekeeping an online network and/or offline community group for other EHE families.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The interviews were recorded⁸, fully anonymised, transcribed and coded in Vivo using thematic techniques. The use of a research journal, memos and annotations played an important role during iterative stages of moving from inductive to primarily deductive coding (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Though the wider project was primarily empirically driven, a plane of conceptual tools applied in *bricolage* were used to shape the later stages of interpretation and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). These included forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), communities of practice theory (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). Most pertinent to the study of EHE pedagogies presented in this paper, Bernstein's code theory (1975a; 197b) and invisible pedagogies.

Study Population

The inter and intra-familial compositions among this study population were highly heterogenous. One overarching commonality in the demographic characteristics was that nearly all identified as White - British, and the vast majority were highly educated. Except for four fathers, most parents were mothers, who typically assumed primary responsibility for EHE. The majority of EHE children and young people presented as male (Fensham-Smith, 2019).

Some parents in this study had only recently begun EHE following deregistration from school. Others had been practicing EHE for 15 years and there were many permutations in-between. The choice and selection of styles, methods and approaches used among this study population also varied highly. Even within families one child may have attended school while another received EHE. Additionally, five families in the interview population described their provision as 'flexi-schooling'. Thus, none of classifications that have been developed in EHE research thus far could fully describe all the permutations that were presented across the entire study group. Where parents did explicitly state an influential approach to their families' EHE practice, 'child-led', 'autonomous' and 'unschooling' were most common (Fensham-Smith, 2019).

While there were many points of difference in the contexts, beliefs and children's experiences that informed diverse ways of 'doing EHE', parents

⁸ 56 hours of interview data was recorded and transcribed.

commonly described the goal of EHE as a means to cultivate and restore 'happy', 'confident' and 'independent' learners- a subset of 'soft' skills perceived or experienced to be missing in state-maintained schooling (Fensham-Smith, 2019).

Findings: The Pedagogic Life of EHE

While families in this study had diverse experiences, beliefs, ideas and EHE approaches, there were two overarching and idealised pedagogic transitions, the shift from predominantly *visible* to *invisible* and, later in this journey, from *invisible* to *visible*. It was found that these transitions were highly individualised and not based on an explicit age-based criterion. Both transitions were predicated upon the acquisition of increased social and cultural capital via online and offline networking with other like-minded EHE parents and families (Bourdieu, 1986). Across this journey, I draw attention to the diffuse evaluative criteria and used to assess learners when invisible pedagogy types mostly resembled weak *classifications* and weak *frames* (Bernstein, 1975a).

Visible to Invisible

For families who had recently entered EHE after school exit, the added financial pressure because of changes to working patterns exacerbated the worry of how to do 'more with less.' A component of this was not just in purchasing resources, but also in finding affordable social and culturally enriching activities to do together (Lareau, 2011). At this time, parents described 'going flat out' to research and plan local events and activities for their children to participate in offline. They also used this opportunity to 'turk' in online networks to seek advice and share experiences with experienced EHE parents. Reading blogs and exchanging conversations online with more established EHE parents played an important starting point in thinking about doing education differently. As an example:

Lisa⁹: At the beginning, I was not aware of the whole radical unschooling philosophy...for us that has come from some of my friend's blogs... We can see what they are doing, although they don't do anything in a structured way, they document what they are learning. It makes you realise, well actually, they are learning from what some people see as play.

⁹ Pseudonyms have been used throughout this study.

The acquisition of increased online knowledge about ‘child-initiated’, ‘autonomous’ and ‘unschooling’ approaches helped parents to reframe their identities and positions towards creating more personalised and *weakly* framed programmes of learning for their children. When reflecting on how their families EHE practice had evolved, Irene illustrated:

Irene: It has changed my way of thinking totally because I can now see education in everything. Even when a child is playing, it involves learning. It is just something that has happened...once you are into the swing of home-education, you can turn a normal day out into an extended educational opportunity...being around families and watching their children has really proved that it can work.

Among the families whose children had been de-reregistered from school to receive EHE, several described adopting the temporary strategy of ‘de-schooling’. This was described as an early period in home-education where children were given the opportunity to recover from rigid routines, social pressures and expectations previously felt in school. The unofficial rule of thumb, I was told, was 1 month for every year in school. After this temporary period, many attempted to emulate a more formal school approach. When reflecting on the changes in their approach, one mother explained:

Fiona: Quite a lot of people get paranoid and feel that they have to do 9-5 everyday... like ourselves, people may start off using those resources, quite often when they have got over that first period when their child recovers from the damage that has been done at school... But people come to realise through meeting other home ed. families that you don’t have to copy school.

After interacting with other more experienced EHE families and seeing alternative approaches in action, many parents subsequently described their approach as altering to a semi-structured or unstructured EHE style. Across the study population, there wasn’t a common age, or clearly delineated time frame for when this transition was made. When this gradual switch was made, learners were said to have been given a greater degree of agency in deciding what to learn (*sequence*) and when they learned (*pace*). One young person illustrates the increased freedom that they experienced in the everyday life of invisible pedagogy:

Billie: Until I was about 14, we never did proper work...we just did projects and stuff, learning about things I was interested in... Some days we wouldn't work at all, some days we would go to the beach because it was too sunny to work. It was very relaxed, there was never any specific way of doing anything. It was very unstructured.

In these approaches, the boundaries between subjects were blurred. Learning through familial conversations in the car, playing, walking in the park, shopping in a supermarket all formed part of these educational activities. For example, one parent illustrated:

Abbey: We do lots of numeracy out in the park...You know, how many mallard ducks are there on the lake... is almost taking the opportunities that arise in day-to-day living.

These aspects of the findings are merely confirmatory of existing work (Safran, 2010). Except, viewed through the lens of invisible pedagogies, one might interpret that the child, and their capacity to self-regulate their own learning becomes the central subject to be studied.

Arranging the home

In invisible pedagogies, what others have called 'autonomy support'(Riley, 2016; Riley & Gray, 2013), was mediated through what can be interpreted as a tacit and subtle form of control. This was evident in how parents described 'planting seeds' or 'leaving a trail' via the intentional arrangement of artefacts and everyday objects in and around the home for their children to accidentally notice. As one parent illustrates:

Cerian: I would say that I was a facilitator, and an opportunity giver...They may think they have spotted something and thought it was a good idea all by themselves, but probably 8 times out of 10, I have placed it there for them to spot. ...I will pick it off the shelf in the library and leave it at home in the book box and not say anything about it and just leave it there. They will pick it up out of the box and say, "oh, that looks interesting"and head off on that tangent...Or if there is something interesting on the radio, or a discussion TV show, I will turn up the volume and see if they will listen. Or if I'm sitting watching TV in the evening and I spot something, I think, "That could be interesting." and I will press record...all of the recorded stuff in there that they watch is there here because I've decided it's a good idea. So, there

is that kind of putting things in their way and then there is the helping them when they suddenly want to know where to find something, helping them to find out what they want to know.

Holt (1997) infers that the free teacher urges children to look for clues. Yet, another way to view it is as indirect tacit control. In these forms of pedagogy, sometimes the learner might never know what they are looking for. This could be viewed to be a somewhat totalising form of power because it necessitates a level of self-policing in the learner that is constant wherein the learner does not know when their behaviour is being assessed (Bernstein, 1975b). Holt (1997) concedes that there is no such thing as an unstructured social encounter, and/or learning system. It follows, however that some structures are less restricting than others. Holt claims that to clearly define what a child may not do, rather than instructing them on what they 'must do' apparently offers a less restrictive, and by implication, a freer setting in which learners can imagine and express themselves. Arguably, the tension here lies in implicit vs explicit relations of power and control, observable in the exchange between the transmitter (home-educator/parents) and the acquirer (children).

Finding the right EHE group

This study found that participating in online and offline networking enabled parents to increase their social and cultural capital to provide highly individualised interfamilial community learning contexts for their children. Similarly, to what others have found, these groups played a role in strengthening the sense of belonging and strengthened identities among families. For most families in this study, going to 'groups' was a core part of their EHE practice (Safran, 2010; Thomas & Pattison, 2008). They also, I suggest, helped parents to sustain invisible pedagogies.

What has previously not been acknowledged since the growth of online networks, is how EHE parents used the internet to pre-arrange idealised secondary sites for the child's offline acquisition (Bernstein, 1975b). While I do not wish to misrepresent the positive and enriching social experiences that were described in this data, this arrangement could also be interpreted as a marker of tacit parental control. This was particularly evident in parents accounts of 'finding the right group' and/or using the internet to create a new one. As examples:

Ryan: [S]chool is such an artificial environment...There's no other point in your life where you are going to be forced to socialise with people who happened to be born in the same year...The trouble with home-education groups is that you don't always get the right group of kids there. Quite often groups end up as places that are quite cliquey...I now run a group with another home-educating father... the group has a couple of rules in that nobody can tell you what to do... It is not about belonging to networks, or cliques and exclusive friendship circles.... [W]e've had a couple of parents pull out their children because some aren't willing to give their children the kind of freedom to do fuck all for five hours.

Gemma: We used to attend much more EHE groups...with more alternative, hippish folk...but after [my son] was bullied, we have since found a smaller group where people tend to stick together...Sometimes it's nice to be with people who know exactly what you are going through...

It could be inferred that participating in some of these communities facilitates the acquisition of *expressive* code - reflecting the values, norms, and states of being that parents wished to transmit. In this respect, while subjects are explicitly *weakly* classified and *framed* within EHE group structures, the cultural transmission of social values may be strengthened (Bernstein, 1975a).

Evaluative criteria

Sustaining invisible pedagogies is a time-consuming and, sometimes exhausting, role for facilitators, precisely because the criteria for evaluation are multiple and diffuse (Bernstein, 1975b). In this study, the processes of not being able to explicitly evaluate their child's progress was a source of anxiety for some. Not only did finding the 'right' EHE group help parents to arrange a personalised learning context for secondary acquisition, but they also appeared to extend opportunities for parents to observe, differentiate and assess the inner readiness of the 'doing' EHE child through 'play' and 'busyness'(Bernstein, 1975b). As examples:

Cerian: They don't know when I'm watching them. Watching them play, completely free, free to do their own imaginary play and to just have that freedom.

Trish: The friends I get on with, have similar attitudes and a similar outlook on life. So, we do not have a car through choice. We recycle as much as we can...New families that come into the group were amazed at all the children playing together, playing the same game and enjoying it. So, although the children have their own friendships, because me and this other mum have encouraged the children to play together, you get everyone to muck in.

The illustrations above perhaps resonate with Bernstein's (1975b) account of surveillance in invisible pedagogies. On the invisibility of pedagogy in infant education, Bernstein considers the inferences about the developmental stage that teachers draw from the ongoing behaviour of the child. He describes readiness and busyness as areas of high visibility for teachers. Being busy and the doing child was also an area of high visibility for parents. As a further example of the importance of being busy in the self-regulating EHE child, one parent explained:

Nadine: In practice, what I usually get is the little seeds disbursing over the house and garden saying 'I'm being creative', 'I'm drawing', 'I'm reading about my fish tank', or 'I'm counting my toys'...and then I just think are they're being creative and busy following their own interests, So we don't get round to the sit down work all that often.

Invisible to Visible

This study found that there was an intended or realised transition from *invisible* to *visible* forms of pedagogy. Most families with children aged between 14-18 were either studying for or planning to undertake formal qualifications with the view to securing access to further and/or Higher Education. During this transition, most parents utilised their social and cultural capital to provide children with discounted private tutoring or informally via an existing EHE parent volunteer in EHE groups (typically an ex-qualified teacher). For five families, the prohibitive cost of public exams meant that some EHE young people had to devise an alternative means of access to Further Education. For example, Dylan, a young person of a single parent household, explained that his mother could not afford to pay for GCSEs¹⁰. Wanting to attending college, but without any formal qualifications, Dylan made use of a free Massively Open Online Course (MOOC). Having complet-

¹⁰ General Certificate of Secondary Education is a qualification taken in England, Wales & Northern Ireland.

ed the course and gaining a certificate, Dylan used this to enter a Further Education College:

Dylan: I finished a computer science course this year through Harvard University. It was hard, but I completed it, got a certificate and that was a big part of me being able to get into college.

For others, the transition towards more *visible* forms of pedagogy was not always a straightforward, or even positive, experience for young people. For example, Stephanie recalls accidentally self-teaching herself the incorrect syllabus for a Maths GCSE:

Stephanie: Freedom is a gift and a bit of a curse, because you can just end up not doing stuff for a very long time... I've had to teach a lot of my GCSEs to myself, which is quite difficult, I ended up learning the wrong tier for my Maths, so I had to revise it all again.

The issue of access to secondary level qualifications is an ongoing challenge for EHE learners in the UK, and particularly in-light of the pandemic. The present system is said to function as a 'postcode' lottery¹¹ (Centre for Social Mobility, 2021). It would be valuable to further explore if alternative access routes have become more commonplace for EHE young people given the even greater expansion of MOOCs since this data was collected.

Reflections on EHE

In this final section, I synthesise the reflections of EHE parents and young people to show how the *pedagogic life* of EHE pointed towards a successful transmission of social values (Bernstein 1975a). Interestingly, this was a relational transformation, in both parents and EHE young people, who themselves had constructed their identities, values and attitudes in wider social learning systems of networks and communities (Fensham-Smith, 2019).

Most parents with children nearing the end of the age of compulsory education (18 years) described how, through their experiences, they had be-

¹¹ At present, if an EHE young person wishes to access public examinations as a 'private' candidate and obtain qualifications like GCSEs, the associated costs are born by parents, rather than the state. A few local authorities in England (local government organisations), provide grants towards the costs of public examinations, but this is not widespread practice and based on the area that families reside in.

come more reflective and philosophical through their EHE practice. As an example of this:

Elaine: I think now, I would class myself far more as a philosophical home-educator because I have seen the benefits of not being in the mainstream school setting. But my initial reaction, was the knee-jerk, ‘this is a crisis’ reaction.

The intended messages of cultivating ‘free’ and independent learners who were their ‘confident’, and authentic selves’ were strongly visible in the reflections of EHE young people. In describing what EHE had meant to them, they reiterated that their experience had given them a vital skillset that was perceived to be absent via a mainstream schooled education. It was also found that these narrations simultaneously positioned the ‘schooled’ child as the undesirable ‘other’. As examples:

Billy: [B]ecause I got to choose what I learned about, I don’t have an aversion to education...Whereas at school you are forced to do subjects you don’t like...It’s much better I think, having the opportunity to learn yourself.

Rob: It means that I have always felt comfortable in public situations... I went to college and they were all stupid and lazy.

The beliefs and values that these learners had come to assume arguably mirrors the ideologies of the EHE community contexts within which these young people had been socialised into. One young person advocated that everyone could be home-educated in their own communities:

Cole: If everyone in the whole country was home-educated, it would not really be a problem...everyone would have their own communities so socialising wouldn’t be a problem, it would be the norm.

Discussion and Implications

This study has presented an alternative means to explore structure and autonomy within and across social-situated contexts that blur the lines between curriculum types and informal, non-formal and formal education places and spaces. Importantly, future work in forms of EHE and self-directed education should acknowledge the interrelated sites of knowledge construction that blur the between home, schools, and community spaces

which are taken for granted. Exploring the arrangement of these contexts is likely to reveal more about the dynamics of power, values and messages that are transmitted through pedagogies with *weak* classifications and *weak* frames (Bernstein, 1975b).

Through the remaking of new social structures in EHE, this study explored the reconfigured pedagogic relations that can mediate learner ‘freedom’. While EHE children and young people in this study did have greater control over the *sequence* and *pace* of their programme of learning, it contends that EHE approaches inspired by the ideals of unschooling can be considered as ‘unstructured’, neutral, or devoid of power and control. To be clear, no pedagogic relationship is neutral and value free, nor do I wish to imply the tacit powers and control to mediate children’s autonomy in the context of EHE is necessarily negative. Equally, I do not wish to pathologize EHE parents, who are primarily mothers, engaged in a practice that accompanies a significant amount of gendered and emotional labour (Lois, 2013). Rather, this study has provided another means within which we might further explore, discuss, and debate the polarised assumptions made about the inherently liberating possibilities of EHE, both as a site of resistance and individual transformation.

Crucially, sustaining invisible pedagogies in this context was predicated on the acquisition of high levels of social and cultural capital (Fensham-Smith, 2019). Yet as other UK studies have illustrated, even greater forms of capital are needed to pass as a ‘legitimate home educator’ among Muslim and Gypsy and Traveller families (D’Arcy, 2014; Myers & Bhopal, 2018; Pattison, 2020).

EHE does not exist in a vacuum and the ways in which pre-existing structural inequalities may be exacerbated via this route for some groups more than it is for others is not discussed, challenged, or researched enough. In this political and contested arena of freedom, power, and control in EHE pedagogies, perhaps we should question “whose knowledge is worth most?” (Apple, 2003).

EHE for the Common Good?

Evidentially, the broader significance of these findings speaks to ‘old’ worries about the growth of EHE as an indicator of rising individualism and an erosion of the common good (Lubienski, 2000). To return to the question posed at the start of this paper: how might the pedagogic practices of EHE

be disrupting, subverting, and/or reproducing a wider neo-liberal project of schooling? Perhaps the journey towards the 'ideals' of invisible pedagogies in EHE mirrors a broader project of becoming enterprising selves. To use Rose and Miller's (1992) words:

[T]he subjective being, it is to aspire to autonomy, it is to strive for personal fulfilment in its earthly life, it is to interpret its reality and destiny as matters of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice. (p. 142)

In reflecting on the transformation of public into private goods and socialisation towards individualism, what ontological work might afford majority groups in EHE with the tools to use their privilege and positionality to affect social change? Romero (2021) calls for a *critical unschooling praxis* as a provocation for the wider project of self-directed education to: "[d]iscern how to leverage one's own skills, privileges, passions, and abilities to act and education in ways that transform oppressive conditions" (p.67). He argued that it isn't just enough to use self-directed education as means to nurture an individual child's own internal capabilities. To live up to the implied democratic nature of these pedagogies necessitates challenging the implicit assumptions of what has been a largely exclusive and white, middle class project. This necessitates open-mindedness, critical reflection and enacting social change for the common good (Romero, 2021).

Arguably, this extends to challenging the factionalism and 'othering' that can take place within EHE communities themselves, amidst a wider symbolic struggle for legitimacy and recognition (Fraser, 1999; Fensham-Smith, 2019). In the UK, contemporary discourses surrounding 'learning loss'¹² during pandemic disrupted education appears to be countered by the efforts of some symbolic cultural actors (EHE advocates) to demarcate the boundaries between illegitimate (school assisted remote learning at home) and legitimate EHE via Unschooling (Apple, 2000). In seeking to understand how, or indeed why, pandemic disrupted educations might be similar and/or different to the 'ideals' of self-directed education, necessitates considering why transitioning from *visible* to *invisible* pedagogies is possible for some groups more than it is for others.

New and existing researchers of EHE also have an important role to play in 'critical unschooling as praxis' (Romero, 2021). Given that the scholar-

¹² See: Bennet (2021): 'pandemic schooling at home is not home-schooling'.

ship base is overwhelmingly Western centric, how might EHE scholars use the context of pandemic disrupted education to forge new intradisciplinary conversations with a wider collection of international scholars? Through empirical research, how might we further consider the opportunities and constraints faced by EHE learner's when they transition from invisible to visible pedagogies? Now and in future, this necessitates extending opportunities for an open and reflexive dialogue.

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