Family Transitions and Home Education: Circumstances, Processes and Practices

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2021 Sarah Louise Gillie

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.0001421e

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
FAMILY TRANSITIONS AND HOME EDUCATION: CIRCUMSTANCES, PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

Sarah Gillie

Doctorate in Education (EdD)

March 2022
Abstract
This study investigates the processes leading certain UK families to home educate. The research focus is: What circumstances inform the transitions of families to home education? The analysis draws upon a large-scale online survey, face-to-face interviews and case studies.

Home educators are regularly portrayed as operating outside the accepted, or even acceptable, norms of society and the education system. Parents seeking inclusion for their children can instead find themselves and their children excluded in - and outside - school. The thesis blends Turner’s liminal theory and Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems model to develop a unique analytical framework that gives voice to participants’ circumstances and insights into their marginalisation and transitions. This framework additionally provides a lens for schools to better understand their relationships with families, to meet institutional, professional and ethical responsibilities in a timely way.

Findings reveal what are cumulative, sometimes protracted, and traumatic processes, leading to discord, crisis and eventual schism between families and schools. These processes, and the fractured relationships that result, can push families to home educate. Sequences of events take on aspects of a metaphorical ritual, with discernible stages in what can be considered a social drama, where initially liminal actors move from discord through crisis to develop a sense of community and more confident home education practice.

Recommendations focus on inclusivity - to help schools prevent the escalation of discord with parents who have become very worried about their children’s progress and wellbeing, and for local and national education departments to develop more co-productive relationships with the families they serve.
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to everyone who participated in my research for their generosity and trust. I feel privileged that families shared the circumstances and transitions they had experienced in such detail. These insights are valuable to those working in the education system and can offer support to other parents and children in similar situations.

I would like to thank my supervisors, at the Open University, Roger Hancock, Honorary Associate, and Kimberly Safford, Senior Lecturer Education Studies, who have offered academic communitas from the very start, including by challenging me at times, and in providing a safe space for me develop and express my thinking. I am also especially grateful to Dr Alan Thomas, for his interest, wisdom, kindness and time. Friends, colleagues and the OU community have supported me along the way, thank you all.

My outlook as an educator has been shaped by the many wonderful students it has been my honour to work with and who have taught me so much. Without them, I would not have begun this research.

Finally, and most importantly I must thank my family, whose love and encouragement have sustained me.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction and rationale ........................................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Thesis structure ..................................................................................................................... 11  
2. Selected literature review .......................................................................................................... 14  
   2.1 Policy and legal context ........................................................................................................ 15  
   2.2 Home education research ..................................................................................................... 33  
   2.3 Parent-teacher relations and children’s school-based difficulties ....................................... 41  
   2.4 Explanatory theory .............................................................................................................. 47  
   2.5 Summary .............................................................................................................................. 59  
3. Methodology and methods ........................................................................................................ 61  
   3.1 Research design .................................................................................................................... 62  
   3.2 Ethical considerations .......................................................................................................... 70  
   3.3 Survey ................................................................................................................................ 75  
   3.4 Face-to-face participation ...................................................................................................... 77  
   3.5 Children’s participation ........................................................................................................ 81  
   3.6 Interviews and transcription ................................................................................................. 87  
   3.7 Analysis of the data .............................................................................................................. 90  
   3.8 Summary .............................................................................................................................. 95  
4. Findings: online survey ............................................................................................................. 97  
   4 (a) Survey responses .............................................................................................................. 97  
   4.2 Circumstances, transitions and processes .............................................................................. 103  
   4 (b) Survey illustrations .......................................................................................................... 131  
5. Findings: fieldwork .................................................................................................................... 143  
   5.1 Family 1: Minnie, Hermione, Teddy and Rainbow .............................................................. 143  
   5.2 Family 2: Jack and Ella ........................................................................................................ 150  
   5.3 Family 3: Ramona and Matilda ........................................................................................... 155  
   5.4 Parent interviews ................................................................................................................ 162  
   5.5 Child interviews and survey participation ............................................................................ 166  
   5.6 Summary of fieldwork ........................................................................................................ 171  
6. Analysis ...................................................................................................................................... 173  
   6.1 Themes ................................................................................................................................ 173  
   6.2 Circumstances ...................................................................................................................... 174  
   6.3 Processes .............................................................................................................................. 178  
   6.4 Transitions ........................................................................................................................... 186  
   6.5 Practices and ongoing processes ......................................................................................... 191  
   6.6 Summary of analysis ........................................................................................................... 197  
7. Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 199  
   7.1 Addressing both parts of the research question: What circumstances inform the transitions of families to and within home education? ........................................... 199
7.2 Strengths and limitations ........................................................................................................... 206
7.3 Further research ...................................................................................................................... 208
7.4 Personal and professional development ............................................................................... 209
7.5 Recommendations arising .................................................................................................... 210
References ...................................................................................................................................... 212
Appendices ..................................................................................................................................... 235
Appendix 1: Early literature reviewing ......................................................................................... 235
Appendix 2: Conceptualisations of liminality ............................................................................ 236
Appendix 3: Survey with collaboratively drafted questions ........................................................... 237
Appendix 4: Children's information leaflet example .................................................................... 241
Appendix 5: Parent consent form example .................................................................................. 242
Appendix 6: Concept map examples ............................................................................................ 243
Appendix 7: Figures related to demographic data ........................................................................ 244
Appendix 8: Children's reported diagnoses .................................................................................. 247
Appendix 9: Interview notes and early grouping of data ............................................................... 249
Appendix 10: Analysis and counting ............................................................................................ 250
Appendix 11: Analysis and coding ............................................................................................... 251
Appendix 12: Links and resources named by participants ............................................................ 252

List of tables

Table 1 Interactive factors framework (based on Frith, 1999) ......................................................... 30
Table 2 Overview of methods and data ......................................................................................... 62
Table 3 Participant responses to Q10: ......................................................................................... 118
Table 4 Overview of participants: survey illustrations ................................................................. 131
Table 5 Overview of participants: family interviews ...................................................................... 143
Table 6 Overview of participants: parent interviews ..................................................................... 162
Table 7 Overview of participants: children ................................................................................... 166
Table 8 Conceptualisation of liminality, work extensions, family experiences .............................. 236
Table 9 An example of recorded counting and cross-referencing ................................................ 250
Table 10 Links to resources named by participants .................................................................... 252
# List of figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Flowchart outlining the co-construction of questions</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Concept map example (Teddy, 20/11/2018)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Example of digital concept map representation</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>NVivo word-clouds of participant responses</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Application of reflexive thematic analysis</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Participant reported locations</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Reported school experiences and relationships</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Parent reported supportive networks</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reported group participation and access to online learning</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Home education activities, practices and resources</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Reported styles of home education</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>A representation of parental 'liminality'</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Sources of 'communitas'</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>A representation of the stages of social drama</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>A model for families transitioning to home education</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Summary of parent reported processes</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>A way to remain in or return to school</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Developing as a home educator</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>A representation of dysfunctional systems and proximal processes</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>A model for parent-school collaboration</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Early sorting of sources</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Notes from early reading</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Survey 'landing page'</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Survey information (contacts cropped)</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Survey consent</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Survey questions</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Children's information sheet example</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Parent consent form example</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Concept map by Matilda 28/11/2019</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Concept map for Eve, 20/2/2020</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Reported organisation of home education</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Participant reported ethnicity</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Parent reported highest level of formal education</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Reported gender and sibling education</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Overlapping parental experiences</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Children's reported needs</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Diagnoses and co-occurrence EHCP or Statement of SEN secured</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Reported bullying and primary diagnosis</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Interview notes 20/11/2018</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Interview notes 28/11/2019</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Collation of data in early thematic analysis</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>An example of manual counting of survey responses</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Initial theme generation from coding</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Main themes developed</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Participant reported experiences and sources of support</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction and rationale

My motivation for undertaking this study resulted from contact with families in my professional role as a specialist teacher, and as a volunteer for a local autism charity. With growing unease, I met parents working to overcome what they regarded as their children’s unmet school learning needs and negative school experiences. The aim of my research is to understand the circumstances that contribute to such parents’ feeling that home education is the only choice available for their children. My study seeks to comprehend the processes that families experience as they transition away from the school education system and develop their own home education practices.

Ofsted (2019) acknowledges a pattern of schools encouraging the parents of some children with so-termed ‘special educational needs’ to deregister and begin home education. Known as off-rolling, Ofsted (2019) recognises this to be a way for schools to avoid permanent exclusion, and consider that the practice serves the school’s purposes and is unlikely to be in the best interests of the child or young person. Reflecting this, and news media reports (e.g., Staufenberg, 2017), one family I met had been advised by county officials that no suitable school-based placement was available, and they should therefore home educate. After two years of negotiations, during which time their son attended just a few hours of hospital school each week, a specialist placement was secured. I wondered what might have happened if the parents had not been so determined. Media reports confirmed what I heard from contacts across the UK, both as a volunteer and in my professional experience, of children whose parents had begun home education not by choice, but as a last resort (e.g., Adams, 2018).
Whereas it is the duty of the local authority to provide school places, in England and Wales, it is the ‘duty of parents to secure education of children of compulsory school age [italicisation added]’:

The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him [sic] to receive efficient full-time education suitable -

a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and
b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise. (Education Act, 1996, p.4)

The words ‘other’ or ‘otherwise’ also describe these rights and responsibilities in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 and the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

The 2020 local authorities survey by the Association of Directors of Children’s Services indicated that 75,000 children were being home educated in England. This represented an increase of 38% on the previous year, and was attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, with numbers expected to fall (ADCS, 2020). Prior to that, the government research briefing estimated the number of voluntarily registered home educated children in England at around 55,000-58,000 in 2018 and acknowledged that the true number would be higher (Foster and Danechi, 2019); annual updates for these figures were postponed during 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19. Statistics for Wales were similarly delayed, and possibly under-reported, with published figures for the 2018/19 school year recording 2517 voluntarily registered home educated children (Statistics for Wales, 2019). In Scotland, published figures reflect only children who have been deregistered from school, whether or not this was instigated by families. Unofficial estimates indicated that 5000-6000 children were home educated in Scotland over the same period (Schoolhouse, n.d.). Of the four nations, home education appears to be
least widespread in Northern Ireland, with 428 children registered as home educated in February 2020 (Halliday, 2020).

Estimates and reports of the numbers of home educated children across the UK have thus been somewhat varied and imprecise. This was acknowledged in The House of Commons Education Committee’s (2021) report on their inquiry into home education. The report explained that its timing was due to ‘the apparent rise in the numbers of home-educated children since 2012, and the impact of covid-19 [sic] on those who had been due to take public examinations in the Summer of 2020’ (House of Commons, 2021, p.7).

While conducting my research, I was highly aware of the level of caution with which the home education population can regard outside researchers, discussed by Morton (2011). As I began my data collection, this had been compounded by a Dispatches documentary (Channel 4, 2019) in which several home educating families had accepted a TV crew led by the Children’s Commissioner for England into their homes. Many felt that the subsequent broadcast, rather than highlighting their reasons for home educating, had instead appeared to criticise their efforts (Stevenson, 2019). This seemed to reflect the mistrust described by Pattison (2013, p.23), who noted that home educators ‘clos[ed...] ranks’ in the wake of the Badman Review of elective home education in England (2009), a principal recommendation of which was compulsory registration and monitoring of home educators.

I reflected that in initial teacher training (ITT), and as a newly qualified classroom practitioner, in the early 2000s, I had come to expect that specialists might support me and that there would be ongoing training for me to facilitate the learning of every student in my classes. In fact, I participated in just one day of mandatory
training related to learning differences in over a decade of working in schools, during which time I attended such courses each year at my own request. My research with teachers across the UK indicated that this was a common experience (Gillie, 2016).

Both as a parent and as a teacher, I had had to develop my own understanding of children's and families' relationships with schools. My work in school-based learning support included some experience of inconsistent multi-disciplinary collaboration and offered insight into assessment and provision. Fifteen years in professional and parental contexts had still not prepared me for meeting these families who seemed to be on a threshold between the school system and home education. Perhaps my unpreparedness was because their experiences contrasted sharply with my own, and with the expectations I had formed as a result. This realisation prompted me to engage with published research and official reports (e.g., Kendall & Taylor, 2016; Casey, 2016). The issue of families home educating to meet children's needs, when this had not been their original intention, seemed poorly understood.

All of this helped to define my research question:

What circumstances inform the transitions of families to and within home education?

From this overarching question, I sought to explore the complex and nuanced sequences of events that led families to undertake home education. I also wanted to understand their transitions within home education – the networks they joined or established, and the resources and practices they employed. Thus, my study’s focus was on the perceptions of parents who perhaps believed that school may not be, or was no longer, the best place for their child to receive an education.
I anticipated that parents would share information regarding any circumstances leading to such a realisation, as well as processes related to deregistration from school, or to a decision not to register for a school place. I was aware that some parents continued to home educate reluctantly, or to seek an alternative placement for their child, whereas, over time, others undertook home education with greater confidence. To understand this, I envisaged gathering and analysing data related to the key decision-making processes that families had undertaken, as well as learning-related practices that they had trialled and established. It was important to find a way to understand these often complex and nuanced processes. Potential difficulties experienced by parents of children with perceived unsupported needs when communicating with teachers have been explored in the past in the USA (Hess et al., 2006) and in the UK (MacLeod & Tett, 2019). However, as far as I am aware, my study is unique in exploring the circumstances, transitions and processes that can lead some UK families to home educate.

Given that home education is about children and their learning, my study sought to include them as active participants. I was also conscious that the histories I might gather would include only the experiences of families, and could not reflect the views of teachers, schools, local authorities and professionals. Such perspectives have previously been considered in government commissioned research and other literature related to home education (e.g., Hopwood et al., 2007; Eddis, 2007). To my knowledge, there are no dedicated national forums where professionals gather to share their experience of children who have deregistered from school.

Initially, I had envisaged that data gathering for the entire study might be conducted online to access a broad UK-based sample. The overall study design was considerably developed to incorporate case studies and capture substantively qualitative data, as such detail appeared necessary in the home education
literature. However, retaining this original online aspect of my study, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, meant that the research remained viable when the COVID-19 lockdown interrupted face-to-face participation. Open questions were drafted to gather ‘rich’ (Fusch & Ness, 2015), ‘thick’ (Latzko-Toth et al., 2016) responses for both interview and survey elements.

My home location in a small county on the border of two UK nations and abutting six other local authorities meant that work and volunteering had brought me into contact with families whose circumstances were shaped by where they lived. To some extent, this is because England and Wales each has its own education, health and social care systems, and each local authority and health board operates with a degree of independence. Notwithstanding the complexity that might result from such variety, it was important to me to capture this potential range of experiences in my research. I was aware from my professional and personal interactions outlined above that the expectations and actions of parents can be informed by their understanding of the legislation surrounding education and equality. Face-to-face participants, introduced in Chapter 5, were based in England as well as Wales; therefore, the related systems of these two nations are most often referred to throughout the thesis.

Because my research explores the transition to home education of some children with ‘special educational needs’, an early consideration was my study’s approach to the language of educational assessment, including references to associated diagnostic labels. The wording of the respective codes of practice for England (DfE/DoH, 2015, pp. 15-16) and Northern Ireland (DoE, 2005, p. 1) states that children have special educational needs (SEN) if they have ‘a learning difficulty [England: or disability] which calls for special educational provision to be made’ for them. England’s code defines ‘special educational provision’ as:
… educational or training provision that is additional to or different from that made generally for other children or young people of the same age by mainstream schools, maintained nursery schools, mainstream post-16 institutions or by relevant early years providers (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.16)

In September 2021, Wales implemented a new framework whereby children have ‘additional learning needs’ (ALN) if they have ‘a learning difficulty or disability (whether the learning difficulty or disability arises from a medical condition or otherwise) which calls for additional learning provision.’ This is further defined:

[…] if he or she—
(a) has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or
(b) has a disability for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010 (c. 15) which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities for education or training of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream maintained schools or mainstream institutions in the further education sector. (Welsh Government, 2021, p.21).

Statutory guidance for Scotland states a child or young person has ‘additional support needs’ (ASN) ‘where, for whatever reason, the child or young person is, or is likely to be, unable without the provision of additional support to benefit from school education provided or to be provided’ (Scottish Government, 2017, p.11).

It might seem reasonable to deduce from these policies that, from a UK government perspective, ‘special educational needs’ exists only in formal educational establishments. This stance is, however, difficult to defend, given that the codes for England and Wales cover children and young people from birth to age 25. Such a position is also disputed by the existence of UK groups for home educating families of children with ‘SEN’¹ and guidance related to home education

¹ For example, the closed Facebook group: Home Educating our Special Needs children has over 6700 members and was established in 2012 https://www.facebook.com/groups/312513312123284
offered by charities dedicated to supporting individuals and families with diagnosed conditions.²

As noted above, different terminology is used in the legislation of each UK nation. Perhaps a more standardised lexicon might allow professionals and parents a clearer, shared understanding. However, in my experience, this somewhat complex language can confuse some parents, or lead them to incorporate the vocabulary into their communication with schools, sometimes resulting in miscommunication or antagonism. Subsequently, tensions can arise around assessment and provision, and energies that should be prioritised in the child’s best interests may, in this complex exchange, be expended on negotiations and disputes. This issue is represented in my findings and discussed in Chapter 6.

My thesis recognises long-voiced warnings that categorisation of individuals can unintentionally result in exclusive, rather than inclusive practice (e.g., Barton 2003; Booth & Ainscow, 2002). It is, however, important to acknowledge drawn-out debates around the use of ‘diagnostic labels.’ Arguments against and for their use include:

- concerns related to stigma or lowered expectations (e.g., Shifrer, 2013);
- understanding or acceptance of self (e.g., Mogensen & Mason, 2015);
- improved inclusion and equality (e.g., Scior et al, 2013) and
- the relative power of different diagnostic labels to secure access to services (e.g., Kirby et al., 2008).

As a researcher, a parent, in my professional role and ethically, it was important to me to reflect a ‘strengths-based’ model of inclusive practice, and not to readily adopt terminology that might appear to medicalise, pathologise or disable and marginalise my study’s participants and their family members, as discussed by

² Such as, the web pages of the National Autistic Society  https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/education/education-choices/england/home-educating
Weaver (2020) in her doctoral thesis. Valle and Connor (2019, p.xix) acknowledge that labels exist, but consider that categorisation is counterproductive to replacing what they see as a ‘segregated education system’. Rather than adopt such nomenclature, unless quoting, my study employs the general term ‘needs’ where official documentation might use special educational needs, ‘SEN’, or the relevant nation’s designation.

To respectfully reflect participant responses, the specific – often school system defined – language and terms they use are, nevertheless, included in my data and related writing. In the case of reported diagnoses of autism, I have followed the lead of the National Autistic Society in referring to autism as a ‘spectrum condition’ rather than a disorder, again, in keeping with a strengths-based approach to children’s abilities. Whilst the social model of disability expects person-first language, such as ‘person with autism’, the National Autistic Society recommends positive identity-first language ‘autistic person’. This is based on the findings of Kenny et al. (2016), who conducted research in the UK autism community to understand how individuals referred to themselves and preferred to be described. Is also the preference of autistic adults I have met and, increasingly, of parents of diagnosed children. These individuals see autism as part of their essential makeup, with their unique combination of strengths and accommodation needs.

Rather than refuting the requirements of the social model of disability to challenge a disabling system, such an approach can be argued to take ownership, and thereby enable the individual. Parallels can be drawn with the biopsychosocial model of inclusion (Engel, 1981) where successes or difficulties are seen as outcomes of interactions between each unique individual, the task, and the environment. My terminological stance, therefore, reflects the professional approach encouraged by Dunn and Andrews (2015, p.256), to ‘adopt identity-first
language alongside person-first constructions' as this balances respect for the preferences of the individuals concerned with professional ethics.

Whereas government publications in Scotland use the term ‘home education’, In England, Northern Ireland and Wales, the designation is ‘elective home education’. In my study, the terms ‘home educate’, ‘home educating’, ‘home education’ are used rather than the common abbreviation HE or the American-style ‘home-schooling’ which is sometimes adopted by the media. Recognising this, in her doctoral thesis examining US and UK experiences, Eddis (2007) referred to USA-based families as ‘home schoolers’ and their British counterparts as ‘home-based educators’. The COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures extended this lexicon to introduce ‘home learning’ for children whose school-based learning was planned and guided by their schoolteachers but mediated or supervised by parents at home, and ‘remote learning’ for children who attended online lessons. Previous research (e.g., Nelson, 2013) uses ‘EHE’, from the UK government’s term ‘elective home education’. However, since my participants have not, on the whole, initially elected to home educate but resorted to it, for my thesis, the abbreviation seems inappropriate.

My UK-wide survey builds on the work of Parsons and Lewis (2010) and Kendall and Taylor (2016). Their research data were collected before the implementation of England’s SEND code of practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) and Teacher’s Standards (DfE, 2011). Participant responses in my study may also reflect, to some extent, Scotland’s Implementation of Additional Support for Learning (Scottish Government, 2017) and Wales’ gradual transition to the new Additional Learning Needs system (Welsh Government, 2021), which has been entering into practice ahead of enactment and statutory implementation since first consultation drafts were published in 2015.
In her doctoral study of public awareness of home education over a decade ago, Lees (2010) noted that she referred to a greater number of contemporary media reports than might be expected in an academic thesis. Certainly, the body of peer-reviewed literature, including theses, related to home education has grown in the intervening years; however, these are not widely disseminated or applied to practice contexts. Furthermore, the themes of home education following school education, and of home education related to children with diagnosed or suspected learning needs remain relatively scarce in academic peer-reviewed writing. As Lees (2010) described, I have found it at times justifiable, therefore, to draw on such media reports or the writing of parents and others with direct lived experience to illustrate significant contemporary events relevant to my study.

1.1 Thesis structure

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 2, I further outline the policy and legal context of both home education and special educational needs in the UK. I continue with a review of selected empirical research of home education most relevant to my thesis and studies related to relationships between parents and their children’s schools. I close the chapter with an overview of theory that I seek to apply to my research data.

Chapter 3 details the research strategy, methodological approach, design, and methods of data collection for my study. Before discussing the research question related to families’ transitions into and within home education, I present the study’s ontology and epistemology. I then introduce the research strategy using ‘integrated methods’ (as defined by Plowright, 2011). Issues related to participant recruitment from within an understandably cautious population are discussed. I consider the ethics of the research and my position as a researcher, as an observer during field visits with families, and as an interviewer - in participants’
homes, and online - in light of my informed, yet possibly juxtaposing, position as a teacher. I present an overview of data collection and my analytical approach. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the study in terms of both scope and design are described.

Chapter 4 presents the survey findings and includes an overview of collected data germane to my research question, with particular focus on children’s reported needs and parents’ school-related experiences. The chapter closes with five illustrative examples arising from my survey that indicate the range of family experiences leading to and informing their home education practice over time. These include accounts of children’s difficulties at school and relationships between parents and teachers.

In Chapter 5, three fuller case studies are presented of families at different stages of their practice, ranging from months to over ten years of home education, each with school-based experience to report. This is followed by two parent-only interview case studies - a flexi-schooling mother and a single father. Finally, the contributions of seven home educated children, six with previous school experience, are reported. Of these, five participated in person, one resulted from a young person’s survey response, and one from an interview online. My fieldwork included participant observations of four of the seven children, from two families. These took place during two separate activities outside the home, organised by home educator groups. Other than for the survey respondent, each child’s participation included the creation of a concept map to facilitate accessibility and participant-checking.

Chapter 6 analyses my data. My process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2021) is outlined. My data are discussed in the context of participants’
‘liminality’, the support or development of ‘communitas’ and the ‘stages of social drama’ (Turner, 1969; 1974). A ‘bioecological systems model’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1995a; 1995b) is applied to understand the school circumstances informing participants’ transition to home education, and their evolving practices.

Finally, Chapter 7 presents my main findings in relation to the two interrelated aspects of my research question. I consider how these contribute to an understanding of parents’ decision-making, of their ensuing practices when taking on home education, and to professional understandings as to why this can happen. The strengths and limitations of the study are considered, along with suggestions for future research. I evaluate my own research experience before sharing recommendations based on participant responses.
2. Selected literature review

My initial literature search using the Boolean terms ‘home education’ AND ‘special educational needs’ returned few UK-based studies conducted in the past five years. When writing my research proposal in 2017, I did not have access to a full university library, which limited my searching to Google Scholar without academic credentials. I had been advised in master’s study to contain searches to the past ten years, which, whilst relevant for research into developments in psychology, was not appropriate for the broader and less comprehensively researched topic of home education.

Once enrolled at the Open University, I also conducted searches for relevant theses through the Open University’s Open Research Online repository and the British Library’s EThoS service. I had previously used ReadCube; University librarians introduced Mendeley, Zetoc and Zotero. An initial exploration of Mendeley resulted in regular update emails of related research, though this was often outside the scope of my study or included works I had already read. ReadCube provided similar leads. I set up Zetoc to provide alerts related to relevant journals and key words including ‘special education’, ‘additional needs’, ‘home education’, ‘school anxiety’ and ‘inclusion’, and I used Zotero to organise my sources. With access to the University’s library, my search parameters were broadened to include wider experiences of children with school learning differences, and a more global perspective. I encountered publications of some significance historically, such as Thomas (1998) and Rothermel (2002).

Family experiences were sometimes comparable internationally; however, it made more sense in the context of my study to predominantly examine the body of UK home education research, albeit that such work does not necessarily focus on
children with special educational needs or school-defined learning differences. As shown in Appendix 1 (Figure 21, Figure 22), initially, I made hand-written notes as I wrote, and created diagrams linking different works and media reports. but later reading tended to be filed electronically and incorporated quickly into my writing, as appropriate. The literature review continued throughout the research design, data gathering, analysis and writing up stages of the thesis.

2.1 Policy and legal context

The current UK model of state-funded school-based education was, arguably, shaped by the Education Act, 1944. Today, the Education Acts 2014 (Northern Ireland), 1996 (England and Wales) and the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 oblige parents to ensure their children’s education and convey the right for education to take place outside a school environment. Lees (2010) considers that despite the legal right for education to occur other than in a formal school setting, since the 1944 Act, a widely held belief has prevailed that school is the locus of education for children and young people. This assumption has consequence for the participants in my study, in terms of their expectations of where their children would be educated.

2.1.1 Home education

Notwithstanding the fact that the UK is acknowledged as a forerunner in home education practice across Europe (Blok et al., 2017), historically, home education has been undertaken by a relatively small proportion of UK families. An initial boost has been suggested to have resulted in, or from, the establishment of a co-operative of and for home educating families, Education Otherwise, by a group of home educators in 1977 (Meighan, 1997). In recent years, official figures have been seen to rise, though, without reliable formal registration, as Chapter 1 suggests, reported numbers remain estimates.
Each of the four nations provides information for prospective home educators online. Northern Ireland’s Department of Education has a single web page, simply stating the legality of home education (DoE, n.d.). The Welsh Government (2017) advice consists of a four-page document. England’s web page (DfE, 2019b) offers a 24-page document and links, including to local authority home education web pages. Online guidance for Scotland (2021) was more recently updated and links to a 30-page guidance document (2007).

In Scotland, all parents wishing to undertake home education should write to their local Director of Education stating their intention. In contrast, under the Education (Pupil Registration) Regulations (England) 2016, (Wales) 2010, and the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, parents are not obliged to declare a decision to educate at home unless children have previously been enrolled in a school or nursery. Except in Scotland, it is the duty of schools to inform the local authority when enrolled children are withdrawn, following written notification from parents. Conditions apply when the child has an education, health and care plan (EHC plan, England) or national equivalent before reaching school age, which is rare. These varying approaches and conditions may result in a lack of clarity regarding the nature and extent of UK home education, or even contribute to the practice being ‘marginalised by ignorance’ (Lees & Nicholson, 2017, p.306).

An example of such side-lining of home educators is arguably evident in my exchange on a Welsh Government Facebook post (@beginsathome, 2020). The post, directed at parents, recommended families to ‘Save money this Christmas! Download Office and Minecraft: EE for FREE using your Hwb account:

---

3 For example, in 2015-16 in Kent, 0.1% of EHC plans were for children under the age of 3 (https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/EHC_plan__by_age__of_child). Government reported figures for England for EHC plans for children in maintained nurseries in the same period was also 0.1% (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/729208/SEN_2018_Text.pdf).
https://Hwb.gov.wales/Microsoft #MSOfficeforFree’. Their response to my question ‘Is this service available to families whose children are educated at home?’ included the statement:

We would also not be able to ensure that they were safeguarded by an appropriate adult if they were to have an account created in some way outside of a school MIS. No parents have Hwb accounts, and we wouldn’t want learners alone in an unsupervised online space. (@beginsathome, 2020)

Given that the post invited parents to download software for use at home, this response suggests a view that parents of children who attend school are ‘appropriate’ adults, whereas those who home educate are not. This seems to reflect the discussion of Pattison (2020, p.95) that, among certain political classes, a ‘common sense’ view of good parenting prevails that expects good school attendance, and further considers that many parents are not equipped, or even suitable, when it comes to home educating their own children. The recommendation of the Education Committee (House of Commons, 2021) to revise key government safeguarding guidance and documentation to include home education states that ‘[g]uidance must be consistent so that both families and local authorities know where they stand’. Whether such updates would better support families, or instead contribute to the marginalisation described by Lees and Nicholson (2017), is perhaps debatable.

Reviews have, in the past, recommended compulsory registration of home educated children, for Wales (see Forrester et al., 2017) the UK (see Casey, 2016) and England (see Badman, 2009). Based on their aforementioned survey, the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS, 2020) recommended registration as way to ensure local authorities discharge their duties to provide for these children. Proponents claim registration should afford benefits to home
educated children and their families, whereas Ofsted (2019) found many home educators considered that such a register would serve to monitor, rather than support them. This debate, highlighted again by the Education Committee in light of COVID-19 (House of Commons, 2021), is pertinent to families such as those participating in my research.

An overview of selected home education studies relevant to my research focus about families’ transition away from school, including past research that has considered parents’ wide-ranging motives for undertaking the practice, is presented in Section 2.2.

2.1.2 The role of local government
The term ‘local education authority’ was rendered obsolete following the 1988 Education Reform Act which also introduced the National Curriculum for England and Wales. Ball (2008) argues that the Act made neoliberal privatisation and outsourcing possible, even inevitable, within state education. School budgets were devolved, but local government remained responsible for school provision in England, Scotland and Wales. Furthermore, local authorities retained a duty to assess and provide for children with ‘SEN’; this arguably complicated rather than simplified either funding or accountability. In accordance with Section 22 of the Children and Families Act 2014, England’s SEND code of practice states:

Local authorities **must** carry out their functions with a view to identifying all the children and young people in their area who have or may have SEN or have or may have a disability. (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.23, emphasis in original)

In England and Wales, under the Education Act 1996, local authorities must maintain records of children enrolled at school, and of those children who, once enrolled, deregister. Whereas children who are never enrolled at school are not required to be recorded on such a register, the children of most participants in my
study will have been counted in this way. Section 436A of the Education Act 1996 requires local authorities ‘to establish [...] the identities of children not receiving a suitable education’, although no definition of such is provided.

Beyond the four nations’ different approaches noted in my introduction and 2.1.1 above, local authority interpretations and their resulting advice to parents and schools also varies. My own local authority provides this single reference to home education on one webpage, titled ‘What the law says’, last updated in 2017:

By law, all children of compulsory school age (between 5 and 16) must receive a suitable, full-time education, at school or otherwise. As a parent you are responsible for making sure this happens. You can achieve this by registering your child at a school or by Electing to Home Educate [sic] your child. Parents will need to inform the Head Teacher of their child’s school in writing if they are considering the option to home educate. If the child is not yet enrolled in a school, the parents should inform the Local Authority. (MCC, 19/03/2021)

In fact, it is not a legal requirement for parents of children not enrolled to inform the local authority of their intention to home educate, and the local authority advice given above does not align with Welsh government guidance. The phrase ‘suitable, full-time education, at school or otherwise’ is an adaptation of the language used in the Education Act 1996 to describe the rights and responsibilities of parents in England and Wales and quoted in Chapter 1 (p.2). Nowhere in government documentation is an ‘efficient’ or ‘full-time’ education defined; to the extent that local authorities seem unclear about their duty towards children who secure funding for ‘education other than at school’ (EOTAS). For example, a Welsh Government review found

… [s]ome LAs fund what they understand to be the minimum amount of home tuition required of them by Welsh Government guidance (five hours a week), whilst others reported providing more than this e.g. 10 hours a week. (Bryer et al., 2020, p.46)
The review notes that there is, in fact, no minimum provision requirement in these cases and that ‘legislation only specifies […] “suitable education”’ be provided by a local authority, with no further definition from Government.

By comparison, ‘Hampshire County Council recognises that home education is a key aspect of parental choice. EHE is equal, in law, to education provided in school.’ (HCC, n.d.) The web page links to the previously mentioned DfE guidance, has a section entitled ‘Things to consider before starting EHE’ and provides information including the role of the local authority, children with EHC Plans, flexi-schooling, further education college provision at 14+, funding for exams, and contact details for relevant county officers. Contrastingly, a job description for another local authority ‘elective home education officer’ listed first in the role’s duties ‘to identify and track such children until they are placed in a school or in receipt of education otherwise’ (RBKC, 2019, p.1). These varied approaches and guidelines, and the ongoing expectation that local authorities will, in future, have greater responsibility for home educated children, through the implementation of a mandatory register and increased monitoring, are potentially significant to participants in my study.

Flexi-schooling, where children attend school on certain days, or for certain activities or subjects, is legal across the UK and has been used by families and schools (e.g., Gutherson & Mountford-Lees, 2018). However, schools are not obliged to accommodate parental requests to flexi-school their children. For example, guidance for Wales (2019, p.5) states, ‘If a school decides not to agree such an arrangement, there is no formal appeal process’. Children who are flexi-schooled in this way must be marked ‘absent’ on the days when they are home educated, as in England:
It is not appropriate to mark this time as ‘approved off-site activity’ as the school has no supervisory role in the child’s education at such times and also has no responsibility for the welfare of the child while he or she is at home. (DfE, 2019a, p.35)

Given that one of the ways that Ofsted in England, and Estyn in Wales, judge schools is according to attendance (Coleman, 2009), this requirement may dissuade schools from entering such arrangements with families. Parallels can perhaps be drawn between this guidance and the response to me from the Welsh Government (quoted on p.17), as both appear to suggest that parents are somehow less able than schools to ensure children’s welfare. This seems to reflect the evaluation of Pattison (2013), in her doctoral thesis, of the dominant position of UK government with regard to trusting parents with their children’s education following the Badman review (2009).

Since 2016, local authorities in England have been invited to complete an annual survey of known home educators, with the most recent resulting report indicating, as described in my introduction, that over 75,000 children were home educated in October 2020 (ADCS, 2020). Notwithstanding the acknowledged likelihood that some families had begun home educating following the COVID-19 lockdown (The Economist, 2021), and the expectation that the numbers of home educators might adjust downwards over the course of 2021 (ADCS, 2020), this is significantly higher than the government’s previous estimate of 58,000 (Foster & Danechi, 2019). ADCS figures and methodology, which rely on extrapolating data to account for missing responses, have been criticised, including by Charles-Warner (2021), whose freedom of information requests resulted in data being collected from all local authorities in England, with fewer than 70,000 children reported as home educated in the same period. Beyond any COVID-19 related increase in the numbers of children being home educated, earlier research by Ofsted (2019)
confirmed media reports and my own professional experience as discussed in
Chapter 1, that a significant proportion of deregistrations were due to parents
deciding that schools did not meet their children’s needs, and/or to ‘off-rolling’
action by schools.

2.1.3 ‘Special’ education

The parallel systems of the four UK nations are underpinned by the Equality Act
2010 and by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
(UN, 1989), ratified by the UK in 1991, and part of Wales’ domestic law. These
legal definitions provide a foundation for common understanding between
organisations working with children and young people, local authorities,
educational establishments, teachers, parents and students. However, reflecting
the findings of Ofsted (2021) and the assertion of Graham and Slee (2008) that a
legal requirement does not guarantee provision, Nettleton and Friel (2017) detail
how legal frameworks related to education, equality and special needs are not
consistently followed in England. The same is true in Wales, as highlighted by
Maxwell et al. (2018).

Research conducted by the ‘Dispatches’ team (Channel 4, 2019) indicated that
22% of children withdrawn from schools to begin home education in England in
2017-18 had so-termed special educational needs (Children’s Commissioner,
2019). In the same report, the Children’s Commissioner (2019, p.8) suggested that
teachers lacked training to identify children’s needs, or the resources to support
them, and that children whose academic results are less favourable to a school’s
league ranking may be ‘abandoned by schools’, echoing Pratt (2016). Arguably,
since changes to policy and practice following the Warnock Report (1978), schools
have been expected to be more inclusive. Still, the pace of such change was slow;
a stipulation that the education received by children in mainstream schools must
be appropriate to their individual needs was not incorporated until the Education Act 1993. Furthermore, the Special Educational Needs code of practice at that time was advisory only and was only enshrined in law by the Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001. Nettleton and Friel (2017) argue the code’s current wording that settings, authorities, health boards and tribunals must ‘have regard to’ the code’s guidance (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.13) limits its legal status, though parents may not appreciate this nuance.

Along with standardised testing, and published ‘league tables’, the 1988 Education Reform Act resulted in what is widely regarded as the ‘marketisation’ of schools. According to Apple (2004, p.23), neoliberalism and the associated so-called marketisation of schools results in ‘pressure to regulate content and behavior through such things as national curricula, national standards, and national systems of assessment’ while simultaneously relocating financial and regulatory burdens at the local level. Ball (2008, p.186) considers the outsourcing and privatisation of elements of England’s education sector a result of ‘fragmented centralization’ that seems to fulfil Apple’s prophecy. Done and Murphy (2018, p.151) suggest that, in the context of England’s SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015), this neoliberalism can result in ‘a politics of blame’, where teachers seem doomed to fail.

Despite standardised expectations, perhaps fostered by such policies, the experiences of children and their families are arguably anything but standard. Noting that some differences were ‘at school level rather than local area’, Ofsted (2021, p. 10; p.38) found ‘inconsistencies in the identification of children’s and young people’s needs’ and ‘a lack of coordinated support’. Similar discrepancies in the application of government guidance is echoed beyond education and health to social care: a review for Cerebra of 149 children’s services authorities identified
almost as many different local protocols for needs assessments, leaving parents unable to predict when, or even whether, their children would receive social care (Clements & Aiello, 2021).

Despite inarguable progress in the fields of children’s rights to education and inclusion and in the responsibilities of parents, schools and education authorities since the late nineteenth century, in their home education research, Kendall and Taylor (2016) contend that the current UK model for inclusion does not ensure children’s support. Parents in their study ‘felt that there had been little or no attempt to develop strategies to support their children’ in schools (Kendall & Taylor, 2016, p.304). This view is reflected in discussions of conceptualisation and policy, and necessary reforms related to SEND in England (e.g., Norwich, 2019; 2016). Perhaps, as Valle and Connor (2019, p.55) suggest, this apparent insufficiency and reported continued inequity is the product of a view of ‘normal’, and a perception of schools being a place for ‘normal’ children, that can be traced to the same time period as the beginnings of mass education. Rutherford (2016) agrees that the ideology that still prevails around ‘special education’ dates back to early compulsory schooling. It seems feasible that conceptions held by schools and teachers of what constitutes ‘normal’ or ‘special’ may be at least partly responsible for a gap between practice and the promise of inclusive education policy, framed in England by the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) and the Teachers’ Standards (DfE, 2011).

Language used in official documentation related to schools and teaching reflects marketisation, for example, the DfE (2021a) review of teacher training referred to ITT as a ‘market’. The same review considers the ITT core content framework (DfE, 2019c) to support such initiatives through explicit teaching of metacognitive strategies that might enable children themselves to understand how they learn
most efficiently, and of expected behaviour – a result of neoliberalism foreseen by Apple (2004). Of interest to my study’s participants, in the context of ‘SEND’, the ITT review directs training providers to instruct trainees in ‘adaptive teaching’ (DfE, 2021a, p.13). Rather than include, this strategy might reinforce views of ‘special’ and ‘normal’ discussed above. The lack of specificity noted above in Section 2.1.2 (pp.18-19) is mirrored in the ITT core content framework, which states that ‘expert colleagues’ may ‘support’ new teachers and that the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) ‘provides additional guidance on supporting pupils with SEND effectively’ (DfE, 2019c, p.23, p.30). In fact, Chapter 6 of the code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015, pp.91-110) lists steps schools should take, but not how they might be taken. Furthermore, as noted by Nettleton and Friel (2017), schools and local authorities seem unclear as to who should provide and/or fund support and assessment, or when an EHC plan is necessary. This lack of clarity is likely to impact families such as those in my study, and is therefore relevant to the first part of my research question, regarding the transition to home education. Expectations of timely, appropriate and cost-effective support, both for inexperienced teachers and for children and their parents are not new (e.g., Rose, 2009); however, these are still not considered met (e.g., Boardman, 2019).

The inconsistent approach to assessment and support highlighted above can result in a 'need for warrior parents' (Ofsted, 2021, p.15), also noted by Cullen and Lindsay (2019). Ofsted (2021) considers that, at local authority level, reforms can be slow to be implemented, that co-production is sometimes poor or even non-existent, and that the joint commissioning of services envisaged by the SEND Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) is often lacking. Academisation, another impact of neoliberalism on the English school system, has also been found to delay the identification of children’s needs, and their subsequent access to support...
All of this has potential to create tensions between assumptions arising from the promise of policy, apparently enshrined in law, the resulting expectations of parents, and families' perceptions of children's actual school experiences. These disappointed expectations are important when considering the circumstances that may have led some of my participants to undertake home education following a period in school.

Norwich (2019) questions whether the Warnock Report, with its intended destigmatising replacement of eleven categories of learning ‘handicap’ with the broad term ‘special educational needs’, failed to address how legislation, policy and schools could ensure inclusion and provision for all children, as was surely its intention. England’s SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) debatably has such intentions, with its co-productive approach, emphasis on involving children and parents, collaboration of professionals, and the expectation of inter-agency collaboration for education, health and social care. Rix et al. (2015) suggest that the development of ‘communities of provision’ could be a way for systems, support, staff, strategies, students and space to be integrated and accessible. Such co-production, as expected by policy (DfE/DoH, 2015), might also have been reasonably expected by my research participants.

According to Norwich et al. (2021), collaborative working by teachers at the school level, continuing with peers in practice the cycle of planning, lesson observation and reflection begun in training, might be a practicable starting point for enhanced inclusion. However, Soan (2021) considers that planned opportunities for new and training teachers to bridge a gap between theory and practice through this type of collaborative reflection are insufficient or non-existent, and notes requirements for teachers to document their lessons for accountability purposes instead. Essex et al. (2021, p.1428) similarly note ‘tensions between policy intentions and
pedagogical practices' impacting new teachers' training. It seems possible that policy, or perhaps planning-related policy interpretation at the local level, can exacerbate an apparent theory-practice gap. It is interesting to consider the extent to which tensions between centralised, standardised expectations and devolved budgets might impact such a gap, and how this, in turn, relates to gaps between policy and practice evident in my research data.

Ultimately, four decades after the 1981 Education Act finally removed the term ‘ineducable’ from education legislation, it seems some schools are not yet, in fact, equipped to provide an education for all children (Hutchinson, 2021), a failure acknowledged by Ofsted (2021). Co-production, collaboration between schools, local authorities, and health and social care services, together with parents and their children, is expected by the Children and Families Act 2014, which in turn underpins the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015). Ofsted (2021, p.3) considered that local areas were ‘routinely [...] not properly implementing the requirements laid out in the code of practice and related legislation’. As well as inconsistent or non-existent co-production, this commonly related to incoherent or absent joint commissioning and the poor quality of EHC plans. Other areas of concern included the identification and assessment of children and their support needs, or once identified and/or assessed, the lack of ambition for these children and young people. These shortfalls at a systemic level are likely to have impacted families such as those participating in my study. Such insufficiencies are thus likely to have informed participant transitions away from school and into home education, important for the first part of my research question.

Perhaps the very term ‘special’ serves to differentiate in a way that may, albeit unintentionally, exclude some children, through lowered expectations (Essex et al, 2021; Barton, 2003). Ryan and Runswick-Cole (2008) argue that approaching
inclusion in education from a rights perspective should guard against this. Yet
Rutherford (2016) recognises that, in seeking to ensure that all students are
included, educators may be perceived as focusing on one group, the antithesis of
inclusion. This complexity and conflict related to inclusion is acknowledged by
Norwich et al. (2021).

Rutherford (2016, p.132) suggests that a ‘dysconsciousness’ can exist, where
teachers are uncritical of the status quo, however imperfect. In this scenario,
schools or teachers might perceive and accept themselves lacking the necessary
training and resources to include all students. McGuckin and O’Sioráin (2021)
agree with appraisals by Soan (2021) and Essex et al. (2021) that newly qualified
teachers can be overwhelmed by the reality of trying to work inclusively for all
learners; they suggest that this can be compounded by a lack of connections
made in ITT between children’s learning differences and other issues, such as
bullying, evident also in my findings. To some extent, this reflects my own
experience as a newly qualified teacher, as well as the findings of my master’s
research that teachers’ access to and participation in related training can seem
haphazard and not consistent with the expectations of policy (Gillie, 2016).

In fact, inclusive attitudes and practical approaches can be implemented at the
setting and community level, for example, through the values-based Index for
Inclusion, described as ‘a resource to support the inclusive development of
suggests an independent and long-term Education Framework Commission is
needed and should be established to effect the necessary and overdue changes
on both a systemic and individual level. Regardless of any such nationally applied
criteria, the role of teachers as potential agents - or resisters - of change has long
been recognised, for example the Dakar Agreement states, ‘no education reform is
likely to succeed without the active participation and ownership of teachers’ (UNESCO, 2000, p.20).

Norwich (2016) considers that education law has seemed to be highly influenced by the medical model of disability, conceding that this is unsurprising, since special educational provision was historically located in hospital settings. The requirement of the Equality Act 2010 for schools to enable students though provision of support, accommodations and reasonable adjustments can be argued to adhere more closely to a social model of disability, or enablement. Given the focus of my study, it appears that these requirements are not always met. With reference to the UK nations’ definitions of SEN quoted on p.8, Norwich (2016) contends that England’s is too ambiguous to be useful in practice. By association, this evaluation would also apply to the language used in Northern Ireland. Norwich (2016) suggests that Scotland’s system of Additional Support for Learning, which should not depend on diagnosis of a learning difficulty or disability for support, relates more closely to a ‘biopsychosocial’ model (Engel, 1981). Arguably, the new ALN system in Wales, heralded as ‘simpler and less adversarial’ with learners ‘at the heart of [the] process’ should offer a similar approach (Welsh Government, 2020, p.3, p.2). This has parallels with the ‘bioecological systems’ model (Bronfenbrenner, 1995a; 1995b) which I draw upon later in my analysis; it is also consistent with use of the ‘interactive factors framework’ (e.g., Frith, 1999) for practitioners to both understand and support learners through their individual profile of strengths and needs.

Such a biopsychosocial approach might epitomise inclusion. Instead of waiting for children’s learning differences to become learning difficulties, timely provision of needs-based services and resources should, in theory, prevent learners becoming dis-abled in a mainstream classroom (Terzi, 2014; Reindal, 2008). According to
this framework, potential and outcomes are seen as the behavioural product of biology and cognition in an environment as illustrated below, in Table 1. The model requires enabling environments and practices to support children’s progress; it aims to recognise the risk of dysconsciousness described by Rutherford (2016), whilst proposing that understanding and inclusion should ensure each individual meets their potential. In essence, it arguably fulfils the anticipatory requirements of the Equality Act 2010 stated in the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.17) for ‘thought to be given in advance to what disabled children and young people might require and what adjustments might need to be made to prevent that disadvantage.’

Table 1 Interactive factors framework (based on Frith, 1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disabling environmental factors</th>
<th>Biological (including neurological) factors</th>
<th>Enabling environmental factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Perception that some pupils are ‘difficult to teach’  
• Staff not trained or not confident  
• Children excluded or ‘off-rolled’  
• Heterogeneous causes and presentations  
| Cognitive factors  
e.g., memory or processing differences | • Inclusive practice  
• Each child’s rights are met  
• Each child feels valued |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioural factors</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children face risk of low self-esteem, demotivation, anxiety, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties</td>
<td>Each child’s potential is met, and children participate in the opportunities provided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the context of individualised learning and home education, a similar framework incorporating aspects of the bioecological model with the ‘zones of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 1978) can be seen in the work of Bowers (2017). In his doctoral thesis, Bowers suggests that local authority educational psychologist colleagues working in so-called mainstream environments can learn from the individualised approach he considers typical of home education. Developing this approach offers a way to understand the reported practices of participants in my study, addressing, and a way to understand the transitions of families within home education. An individualised approach is also relevant to teachers and schools seeking to support children within or returning to their settings.
2.1.4 National reviews

Over past decades, successive reviews, for example from Petrie et al. (1999) to Forrester et al. (2017), have been officially commissioned to understand UK home education. In common with empirical studies discussed in the next section, these have shown that home educators are heterogeneous and that practices are wide-ranging and varied. They also highlight that, short of persistent freedom of information requests (Charles-Warner, 2021), in the absence of an official method to track which children are educated where beyond the state education system, the numbers of home educated children can only be estimated. In recent years, home education in England has been the subject of annual government research briefings (e.g., Foster & Danechi, 2019), though these, as noted earlier, were suspended over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Failures in public systems to protect vulnerable children have provided the impetus for governments to review home education from a safeguarding perspective. In England, the Badman Review (2009, p.32) found no ‘causal or determining relationship [between home education and children at risk of abuse], but simply an indication of the need for appropriately trained and knowledgeable personnel’ to support home educating families. In Wales, Forrester et al. (2017, p.53) concluded that ‘home education is not a risk factor for child abuse or neglect.’

Recommendations from both reviews included two key factors in relation to a national home education register managed at local level, summarised here:

1. those interacting with home educating families should be well trained; and
2. registration should bring with it access to local educational services.

Similar recommendations feature in the report of the Education Committee mentioned in Chapter 1 (House of Commons, 2021).
A third review, by Casey (2016), was not designed to consider home education but ‘integration and opportunity in isolated and deprived communities’ (p.5). As also seen in the more recent Education Committee report (House of Commons, 2021), this review drew attention to home education in the way that it reported concerns regarding illegal and unregistered schools in the context of regulation related to education other than at school. The review included what it called ‘homeschooled’ children in the group identified as needing ‘stronger safeguards’ (Casey, 2016, p.17). Casey (2016, p.120) described the potential, under current legislation, for home educated children or young people to ‘fall prey to radicalisation’ but did not offer evidence of any such instance. At times, such reviews and their recommendations seem to reflect a sense of school education being a national duty (Bhopal & Myers, 2018) or representative of ‘fundamental British values’ (Pattison, 2020).

The Children’s Commissioners for England and Wales have also actively called for registration of home educated children (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2020; Children’s Commissioner, 2019). Recommendations for England have much in common with those from Forrester (2017) and Badman (2009) to provide well-trained professionals and access to supportive services to work with home educators (Children’s Commissioner, 2019). However, there are also parallels with the Casey Review (2016) regarding children’s safety. For example, the Children’s Commissioner (2019) considers a register might have prevented the deaths in the UK of the six children over the course of a decade who were not on school roles. In reality, the incidence rate for the deaths of unregistered, or deregistered, children, is broadly comparable with that for children enrolled in schools, reported as 62 annually (NSPCC, 2020). Furthermore, as acknowledged in the Education Committee’s report (House of Commons, 2021), children’s absence from a school
register is not synonymous with their being home educated in fact. In the context of my study, such implied public perceptions of home education being ‘unseen’ or ‘unsafe’ might impact parents’ initial decision to undertake home education, their later interactions with other home educators, or their willingness to engage with local and national authorities. All of this is germane to my exploration of the transition of families to, and within, home education, the processes they undertake and undergo and the practices they adopt.

### 2.2 Home education research

Despite the commission of government reports in England and Wales as discussed, and the ongoing studies and doctoral research from Petrie (1992) to Fensham-Smith (2017), as previously stated, UK home education is not fully understood. Pattison (2015, p.620) suggests that the growth of home education in the UK will, as a result, ‘never be possible to chart’.

In the USA, religion, particularly fundamentalist Christianity, is seen as a common, or even predominant motivation to undertake ‘homeschooling’ (Gaither, 2017). UK studies focused in a particular geographical area or community, such as Burke’s (2008) doctoral study in East London may reflect this, where, of the 38 home educating families known to the local authority, 48% had given religion as a reason for undertaking the practice, equally split between Islam and Christianity. Whereas previous UK-wide research has not found religion to be a primary consideration for most families undertaking home education, the practice of home education by smaller UK Christian groups such as the Plymouth Brethren has long been recognised (e.g., Petrie, 1992). The Casey Review (2016) indicated religious motivation to educate outside the state school system by some UK-based Muslim parents; arguably this is not always technically ‘home’ education, as it often takes place in madrassas or organised, formal – albeit unregistered - settings seen as
schools by those families who choose this practice. More recently, reflecting on the Casey Review (2016), Bhopal and Myers (2018) explored reasons why some families from ethnic minorities or from certain religious backgrounds choose home education. Whilst it is not the aim of my study to gather such data, responses related to religion are not excluded from my findings.

Lees (2010) discusses the moment when participants in her research realised that home education is a legal, viable or desirable form of education in the UK. This realisation is described as a ‘gateless gate of home education discovery’ (Lees, 2010), hinting at the potential for such practice to be accessible to all, once revealed. Media reports over the course of the COVID-19 lockdown suggest that some parents involved in supervising their children’s remote learning might have had a similar epiphany (e.g., The Economist, 2021). Regardless of the legal status of home education, Bhopal and Myers (2018) suggest school attendance is considered a national duty in the UK, and Pattison (2015, p.628) warns that non-attendance may ‘challeng[e...] the official order’. That the families in my study have broken with expected norms may reflect the extent to which discord in their relationships with school led them to undertake home education, regardless of any epiphany or moment of realisation.

Mothers’ predominant responsibility for home education has been acknowledged both in the UK (e.g., Fensham-Smith, 2017) and globally (e.g., Bhopal & Myers, 2018). Noting this gendered aspect, Watt (2012) remarks on the absence of related research from a feminist perspective and goes further, suggesting that mothers become almost invisible in the research process, which she says often focuses on academic outcomes. Morton (2011) suggests that while the practice of home education may expand the role of mothers, ‘it simultaneously reinforc[es] normative views of motherhood’ (p.9). Morton then considers constructions of
childhood, parenthood and of motherhood, in the context of ‘maternal parenting’ (p. 62), noting that although auto-ethnographic home education research is typically conducted by mothers, its gendered nature is not discussed.

Studies and media reports highlighted an unequal burden on mothers of ‘schooling’ their children at home during the COVID-19 lockdown (e.g., Sandberg, 2021; Andrew et al., 2020). This may have already begun to influence discussions of the gendered nature of home education and of parental involvement in children's school education. For example, Burgess and Goldman (2021, p.13) suggest that the pandemic ‘neither caused nor exacerbated parental inequalities in unpaid work: it revealed them [italicisation in original].’ Furthermore, their research found that most fathers who participated in their study gained confidence in supporting their children’s education. One resulting recommendation is that policy should develop fathers’ involvement in their children’s schooling. This UK-based study of fathers may not reflect global or maternal perspectives. Caligiuri and De Cieri (2021) report that mothers with no prior experience of working from home before the pandemic had found work and home ‘schooling’ commitments interfered with one another. Relevant to my study is the suggestion that mothers are more likely to be primary care givers, noted by Burrell et al. (2017), who suggest this is why fathers’ voices are underrepresented in the literature related to parenting children with diagnosed needs. Whether fathers’ experiences of the COVID-19 lockdown will affect their long-term involvement in children’s school or home education is, as yet, unclear.

Morton (2011) contends that the inclusion of developmental checklists for children under school age, such as the Development Matters framework (DfE, 2020a) effectively acknowledges the role of parents, and specifically of mothers, in their children’s education. My data, gathered in the year before the first UK COVID-19
lockdown, offer a view of parental roles at that time, with teachers and other professional seen as educational experts. My focus is not on mothers or motherhood, yet this role of the parent as an educator in the context of schools is significant to participants in my study, who may need to develop and employ such knowledge and perhaps even expertise at times, to support their own children.

Morton (2011) reflects, and Fensham-Smith (2017) concurs, that the evolving nature of home education and the fluidity of practitioners render any classification quickly redundant. Notwithstanding this outlook, perhaps to clarify their own understanding, or to communicate their findings and perspectives, researchers have long sought to classify UK-based parents’ motives and styles of home education. Notable among these is Morton’s (2010) own three-way codification:

- ‘natural’ - parents opting to home educate for ideological reasons;
- ‘social’ - those who wish to have greater control over their children’s curriculum and friendships; and
- ‘last resort’ – those who undertake home education following a negative school experience.

Morton’s taxonomy echoes earlier labels of home educators as ‘rebels’, ‘competitors’, and ‘compensators’. Rothermel (2002, p.41) cites Blacker’s (1981) no longer accessible MEd thesis as the source of these three terms, attributed to Dick Kitto, a gardener, writer, and founding member of Education Otherwise. Were my study to adopt such a simplified classification, most participants might arguably fall into the group described in Morton’s ‘last resort’ and Kitto’s ‘compensators’.

Rothermel’s (2003, p.84) more complex ‘stratum approach’ allows for differences to appear at multiple levels; however, in the same work, she posits that the UK’s home educating population was already too diverse for such categorisation to make sense. One might wonder, therefore, what the purpose is of her stratification exercise. Describing attempts at classification as ‘simplistic’ (p.74), she explains,
‘home educators share remarkably little in common beyond the fact that they home educate’ (Rothermel, 2003, p.83). I would argue that making sense of such situations and motives, as my study seeks to do through examining common patterns and themes in the experiences of individual participants, is precisely what is necessary if education hopes to be truly accessible and inclusive, whether or not it is school based.

Fensham-Smith (2017) considers that taxonomies of home education, and attitudes to these may be coloured by the researcher’s own background and participant recruitment channels. This seems to echo the warnings of Spiegler (2010) that home education research design risks shaping its findings. At the outset, I consciously designed my study to avoid stereotyping participants, and in analysis I sought neutrality in my representation of individuals and groups who were potentially already marginalised. In so doing, I strove to remain aware of my own life experience and motives in undertaking the research. In recent years, media reports have drawn attention to a relationship between families undertaking home education and children’s needs reportedly being unmet at school (e.g., Hepburn, 2018). This has also been highlighted in government commissioned reviews (e.g., Forrester, 2017). However, to my knowledge, until now, no studies have focused on the related processes and transitions as my research aims to do.

In the past, UK-based home education research has tended to refer incidentally to children’s learning differences (from e.g., Thomas, 1998 to Smith & Nelson, 2015). Arguably, the work of Maxwell et al. (2018) offers a comprehensive overview of the home education of children with additional needs in Wales; however, their research data were collected incidentally as part of a review commissioned to investigate potential risks to home educated children in general (Forrester et al, 2017). A small number of UK studies set out specifically to consider the home
education of children with special educational needs and disabilities. This relative scarcity of research is not a uniquely UK phenomenon; in their review, Slater et al. (2020) reported only one such study conducted in Australia, in 2007. One early UK example is that of Arora (2006), in whose local survey 17% of families reported children’s unmet needs at school as the main reason for choosing to home educate.

Research focused on home educating families where at least one child has special educational needs has typically been conducted via surveys (e.g., Parsons & Lewis, 2010). In a rare UK case study focusing on the experiences of families who had begun home education after withdrawing children from school (Kendall & Taylor, 2016), parents reported teachers’ lack of understanding and training in relation to special educational needs as a contributory factor in their decision to begin home education. This is a significant area for exploration in my study, not least considering the developments in regulatory frameworks related to equality and special education that have been planned or implemented across the UK since their research was conducted in 2010.

How children learn in home education is considered by Thomas and Pattison (2007). Their research confirmed what Thomas (1998) had found, that parents often initially adopted set times and used materials in ways that might resemble school conventions before evolving more informal learning practices. Thomas and Pattison (2007) contend that while parents may ‘scaffold’ learning in the early stages, through a Vygotskyan ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD) (1978), scaffolding cannot account for all their children’s acquired knowledge and skills, since much of this learning happens incidentally. Moreover, this does not account for children’s innate ability to make sense of the world around them, for example
through established routines and interactions, and through play (Thomas & Pattison, 2007).

Two recent studies in particular are relevant to my research. Bowers (2017), another former classroom practitioner, asks what psychologists working to support children in mainstream education can learn from home education practices. He considers Vygotsky’s ZPD in school-based learning and a ‘bioecological model’ of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Bowers (2017, p.27) describes the ‘eco-systems’ according to an earlier model, as resembling the traditional Russian nested Matryoshka dolls, without explicit reference to interaction between the systems. Extending these concepts would seem to offer potential when viewing the school circumstances and home education transitions of my participants and their home education processes and practices. The second, a doctoral study of eight families of children with diagnoses of an autistic spectrum condition, explored the families’ characteristics, the diagnostic pathway for autism, and families’ reasons for undertaking home education in England (Daniels, 2017). With its wider-ranging participation, both geographically and in terms of reported diagnosed conditions, my study proposes to build on this research.

Fensham-Smith (2017) offers an updated view of Meighan’s (1997) appraisal of the Internet’s potential as a resource for home educators in terms of connecting with others, sourcing information and resources or accessing tuition. Her research includes some families who have deregistered their children and found helpful information and contacts via social media. My study’s exploration of how processes that families undergo and undertake in their transition from school to home education may be mediated online aims to elaborate on this. The home education possibilities on offer to those with Internet access, from individual tutoring and group lessons online to massive open online courses (MOOCs) is, of
course, helpful to an understanding of the practices that families adopt following this transition.

Children's rights to be heard and to participate, including in research, are enshrined in the UNCRC (UN, 1989), yet few studies of home education were found to report children's views. This may be due to difficulties in recruiting children as participants from a cautious research population, as discussed in Chapter 1. Bowers (2017) interviewed four previously home educated young adults met at a home educators' festival, two of whom had initially attended school, and all of whom had moved on to further education, providing a retrospective viewpoint. Fensham-Smith interviewed eight groups of young people aged 14 to 19, met at a similar event. Younger children’s views remain under-represented in home education research. Whereas Wray and Thomas (2013) and D'Arcy (2012) interviewed children alongside their parents, Arora (2006) intended most questions in her schedule to be directed to children first, should they be present at their parent’s interview and wish to participate. Direct participation from four home educated children is identifiable in her study of families home educating children with special educational needs.

Acknowledging the difficulties of recruiting young people as participants, Nelson (2013) also interviewed a number of previously home educated teens contacted at a summer home educators’ camp. Her gathering of younger children’s data through a combination of interviews, focus groups and production of children’s photo-collages is perhaps closest to my method of interviews and child created or co-created concept maps. One significant difference between Nelson’s (2013) doctoral study and my own is that whereas my focus is on families who had, on the whole, intended a school-based education for their children, hers is on families who had never considered school.
2.3 Parent-teacher relations and children’s school-based difficulties

The 1988 Education Reform Act represented to many a confirmation of marketisation and neoliberalism in UK education (e.g., Pratt, 2016; Ball, 2008). This brought competing tensions such as devolved budgets and imposed national frameworks as discussed in Section 2.1. That parents were now able to apply for a school place, in what has sometimes been called a ‘market’, reframed families as consumers in relation to their children’s school-based education. This has been suggested to have repositioned parents, and - albeit inadvertently - especially mothers, to take a more active role in their children’s education, beyond selecting their children’s future school (e.g., Vincent, 2017). Related policies are thus important to the participants in my study who have lived experience of apparent choice and expected partnership with schools, however choice and partnership might be interpreted.

Government-commissioned research has long reported on the importance of parent-school cooperation (e.g., Sylva et al., 2004). Education-related guidance and legislation focuses on the duty of settings to children and their families (DfE, 2021b). This highlights the potential of parents as a - sometimes untapped - source of detailed information and a resource to support their children’s learning. For instance, the importance of ‘what parents do’ and the ‘home learning environment’ was stressed by Sylva et al. (2004, p.86) in their report on a DfES-commissioned longitudinal study. The expectation that teachers will work collaboratively with parents is evident in, for example, the EYFS framework (DfE, 2021b), SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) and Teachers’ Standards (DfE, 2011).

Over the past five decades, over 40 studies have been conducted related to UK children’s transitions between schools (Galton & McLellan, 2018). Despite this,
and the expectation of policy (e.g., DfE/DoH, 2015) school transition appears at times neither fully understood nor supported. Galton et al. (2003) consider the transition to a new school between key stages as having an impact four times greater than simply moving from one year to the next within a key stage. Their apparently largely unheeded recommendations for primary schools to redirect support for learning to Years 3 and 4 rather than targeting pupils in Year 6, and for secondary teachers to build on primary pedagogy might benefit children such as those in my study. Timmermans and Land (2019, p.ix) acknowledge the importance of deliberate care in teaching and facilitating student transitions:

> As educators, our attitudes in educational landscapes are often quite unlike those in geographical landscapes. Knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or not, we often beckon learners to approach the edge of their cognitive, affective, epistemological, and ontological landscapes when the surefootedness of the new landscape is not yet in view. As teachers, we have likely traversed these landscapes. Perhaps we remember these crossings; often, however, we do not.

Whilst they refer to older students, it is reasonable to extend the same care to younger children and adolescents. Because the majority of my participants had planned for their children to attend school, and in most cases the children did attend school, the data include descriptions of circumstances and processes related to children transitioning to school, and between key stages and schools, as well as into home education.

The potential for children, and their education, to benefit from the informed interactions of their parents and teachers within their respective environments has long been recognised in the UK and internationally (e.g., González, et al. 2005; CACE, 1967). Rucinski et al. (2018) found that children’s experiences of primary school, and teacher-child relationships in particular, were fundamental to their later academic performance in a school setting and suggest this is consistent with
Bronfenbrenner’s ‘bioecological model’ of human development. Nor is the advantage unidirectional or indeed reserved for children; González et al. (2005) concur with Booth and Ainscow (2002) that families, schools and the wider community stand to gain from collaboration and sharing of knowledge and practice. Despite this, resistance to what is sometimes called an ‘open door policy’ can be evident in the day-to-day practice of teachers, who may seem to judge parents for displays of ‘too much or too little’ interest in their children’s schooling (Vincent, 2017, p.547). Similarly, parents are not always confident of the best way to communicate with schools (e.g., Ranson et al., 2004). Crozier (1999) suggests that when schools do involve families, they also seek to manage them, extending the regulation of behaviour, mentioned by Apple (2004), beyond staff and children, to parents. Perhaps, then, the threshold of this ‘open door’ is difficult for both teachers and parents to cross.

Moreover, it seems likely that intersectionality, overlapping inequities related to race, gender, class, religion, disability, poverty and other factors, described by Vincent (2017) and Ranson et al. (2010) further impacts the tentative efforts of parents as they seek support for their disabled children, or assessment to confirm disability. Almost from its definition in the 1980s, intersectionality has been applied to disability, and for over two decades to special education (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). Parallels can be drawn with Frith’s (1999) interactive factors framework and the work of Bronfenbrenner (1995a; 1995b) in the way that co-occurring challenges can affect the individual and those around them.

Such intersectionality might impact communication between highly qualified and/or senior teachers, and parents, predominantly mothers, whose worry is perhaps exacerbated by their own experience of school, or who may lack confidence speaking or writing. The combined impacts of socioeconomic disadvantage and
race are also evident when families seek diagnostic assessment for ASC in England (Roman-Urestazar et al., 2021). Family histories of school-based difficulties are also possible, given the established heritability of related conditions (Thompson et al., 2015). This extends to situations where a school can effect deregistration as discussed in the media (e.g., Adams, 2018). Beyond the acknowledged disproportionate exclusion of children who were on schools’ SEND registers (Ofsted, 2019), Bhopal and Myers (2018) found that off-rolling was more likely to be applied to children from poorer and minority ethnic backgrounds. This may be reflected in meetings described by participants in my study, regarding their transition from school to home education.

Arguably, along with parental choice and parental voice in the post 1988 decades came what Vincent calls ‘[a]n insistence on parental responsibility and self-sufficiency [that] is, of course, a discourse with some utility when welfare state support services are being reduced’ (2017, pp.542-543). This shifting of responsibility, and the expectation that families can and will resource children’s school-based education, must complicate the parent-school relationship. Moreover, within a school culture of measuring and assessment, Pratt (2016, pp.899-900) suggests the marketisation of education can extend to UK teachers’ view of children’s academic attainment as a ‘good’ by which their own professional success, and future earning potential, may be measured. He warns that this may lower the perceived ‘value’ of pupils with learning difficulties, as also suggested by the Children’s Commissioner (2019). These factors are all consequential to participants in my study whose children once attended school.

The global financial crisis of 2007-2008 may have compounded the impact of Ball's fragmented centralisation on schools and children’s services. This has extended to children’s mental health services, and teachers are increasingly
expected to have accessed training and to have the resources to properly identify children and provide appropriate, necessary support (Scotcher & Boden, 2018). Done and Murphy (2018) suggest that the regulatory framework (DfE/DoH, 2015) and concomitant neoliberalist expectations of teacher accountability are divisive and unsustainable, yet these continue to define professionalism. Norwich et al. (2021, p.312) consider that inclusion in schools requires a ‘balancing of risks’ related to appropriate differentiation and potential marginalisation, which can depend on ‘teacher capabilities, contexts and resources.’

Combined with increased workloads, Vincent (2017, p.547) questions whether teachers have sufficient ‘time and energy […] available for home–school initiatives.’ From this, it may not seem surprising that the exchanges of teachers and parents continue to be charged at times (MacLure & Walker, 2000), or that parents feel a need to diplomatically mirror teachers’ language about and expectations for children during meetings (Bilton et al., 2018). Macleod and Tett (2019) highlight the lost opportunity to individual children’s learning that may be caused by conflicting views that seem to dismiss parents’ knowledge of their own children or perhaps to raise teachers to the level of sole experts.

Beyond school, these experiences can be echoed - or sometimes magnified - during the statutory EHC needs assessment process, when parents interact with local authority teams (e.g., Cullen & Lindsay, 2019). Perhaps a perceived need to maintain their professional identity, or even status, may at times underly schools’ and local authorities’ motivation to define and lead every decision related to children’s education. This tension between the recommendations of research (e.g., González et al., 2005), the requirements of policy (e.g., DfE, 2011), and the realities faced by teachers in school may impact on children and on relationships and trust between schools and families such as those participating in my research.
The role of parental trust in the education system is considered by Bormann and John (2014). Their discussion covers schools’ and children’s perceived attainment in the context of what they call today’s ‘knowledge-based society’ (2014, p.1). This relates to my study in the way that schools track and report pupil performance and in parental expectations, as discussed above. Trust, understandably, is an essential component of the relationships or communications between individuals, between individuals and organisations, and between organisations and systems (Morgner, 2018). That parent assumptions are, to some extent, based on their understanding of policy and published school reports, results and league tables may explain how this trust may be eroded, or indeed lost, when schools are perceived not to meet children’s needs.

Shepherd et al. (2017) consider that parents of children with additional needs must often become skilled at navigating and co-ordinating between health, education and other services. In essence, the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) and EYFS framework (DfE, 2021b) expect this co-ordinating role to be taken on by professionals. Despite this, given acknowledged stresses on teachers' time (e.g., Done & Murphy, 2018; Vincent, 2017), perhaps this is not a realistic, or even reasonable, expectation. Furthermore, funding cuts both at school and local authority level have impacted on available educational psychology services, and, if commissioned, such services tend to focus on children undergoing the EHC needs assessment process (Lyonette et al., 2019). Conceivably, this situation is an unintended result of austerity combined with reforms ushered in by the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015). That cuts to services drive some families to home educate has been established (Children’s Commissioner, 2019; Ofsted, 2019).

Highlighting the inequalities noted above, this shortage has also led to an increase in private funding of children’s assessment by parents who can afford to, when
schools, local authority education departments or NHS have been unable, or
indeed refused, to provide diagnostic services (Hutchinson, 2021). However,
instead of securing support for their children in this way, families have been
blamed for their children’s difficulties, rather than supported (Clements & Aiello,
2021). Some parents have even found themselves under investigation, including
for Fabricated and Induced Illness (FII). A survey of related experiences found:

… parents felt strongly that the allegations of FII (or child abuse) came
about as a direct result of a request for additional support or as a response
to making a complaint. In all those cases where a complaint had been made
prior to the allegation of FII, the complaints were about a lack of support or
the inappropriateness of services that were already being offered. (PCA,
2019, p.2)

Miscommunication between schools and families may precede the breakdown of
relationships or, perhaps, result from these. The Children’s Commissioner (2019,
p.7) considers that some ‘parents withdraw their child […] hav[ing] reached crisis
point as the relationship with school breaks down.’ The nature of the parent-
school relationship is inarguably complex, with nuanced legal, professional and
ethical responsibilities on the part of teachers, and parental imperatives that may,
at times, be biologically driven. Consequently, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that
communication problems may arise. Understanding the interactions between
teachers and parents, and between teachers and children is important for my
study and its appreciation of the circumstances that can lead families to begin
home education.

2.4 Explanatory theory

Several theoretical frameworks that have been applied by researchers in the past
offered potential for aspects of my study’s data, yet none seemed to entirely
address the complex processes that informed transitions of my participants both to
and within home education. Informed by Safran’s (2008) application to home
education research of ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998), Fensham-Smith (2017, p.111) recommends Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) ‘landscapes of practice’ as a framework to understand ‘loosely organised’ home education practices. This theory can explain the dynamic development of practices within home education, but I was not confident that it afforded a sufficient understanding of the nuanced processes leading up to home education to address the aspect of my research question regarding family transitions into home education. Although some participants may have deregistered with apparent suddenness from the school’s perspective, I did not consider Lees’ (2010) conception of home education discovery as a ‘Gestalt switch’ appropriate to my study’s data.

Pattison (2015, p.628) suggests that home education can be viewed as a form of heterotopia (Foucault, 1986), a conceptual space that ‘suspen[ds], inver[ts] and negat[es...] society’s educational norms’. This evaluation of the experiences, networks and practices of home educators, and how they might be seen by those within or aligned with the conventional school system, seems likely to resonate with participants in my study. Nonetheless, while heterotopia may offer a way to understand the destination of some families in my study, it does not seem to address that part of my research question related to transitions to home education.

Bhopal and Myers (2018) explore how some parents in England come to home educate through a largely Bourdieusian lens in the context of race, class and social, economic and cultural inequalities. My study’s focus on families where children have diagnosed or suspected learning needs, might seem to suit a similar exploration in the context of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), as also considered by Morton (2011). This approach would likely confirm an inequality of access to education and wider services and might provide a way to view the
impact of school relationships on transition to home education. I had considered such a framework to analyse the pilot data from my initial study. Now, I sought a way to explain the, at times, staged processes my participants underwent, and the sense of finding themselves on the edge of, or even outside, society’s educational norms. Turner’s (1969) concept of ‘liminality’ seemed appropriate for this context.

Over the past half century, liminality has been applied to many fields of knowledge and situations, as collated by Flannagan (2019) and described by Land et al. (2014). For example, elements of field research itself have been seen as liminal, with the participant researcher on the threshold (Jackson, 2011). Quinlan et al. (2013) credit Meyer and Land with introducing threshold concepts to education research in 2003. Since then, it is believed to have informed many education research papers across over one hundred disciplines (Land et al., 2014).

Learning in liminal locations is also well documented, including outside traditional educational environments, for example in early Internet cafés, as discussed by Beavis et al. (2005). Liminality and threshold theory have likewise been applied to the work of educators, for example, teaching assistants (Mansaray, 2006). Relationships between teachers and students (Richardson, 2019) and between parents and volunteers (Fisher et al., 2018) have also been considered from a liminal perspective. Perhaps of greater relevance to my study is the theory’s application, albeit from a predominantly medical perspective to the experiences of parents, of pre-term babies (Watson, 2010), terminally ill children (Jordan, et al. 2015), and mothers of disabled children (Ryan & Runswick-Cole, 2008).

In the past, home education research has considered reasons for beginning home education following a period at school (e.g., Kendall & Taylor, 2016; Arora, 2006). It has discussed families’ developing home education practices (e.g., Rothermel,
2002; Thomas, 1998). However, to my knowledge, until now, home education research has not specifically focused on the processes and transitions that families undergo as they move away from school and develop their own practices. Nowak’s (2008) consideration of parents’ liminal experiences, efforts and collaboration to secure appropriate educational provision for their children with special educational needs perhaps comes closest to a possible application of such theory for my study. As noted, related theory is common in higher education research, in the context of understanding students’ learning, including teacher training and new teachers’ understanding of inclusion (Rutherford, 2016). Whereas such concepts are seen in special education and disability research, no home education research was found that applied theory related to liminality.

It seems appropriate to my thesis that the ethnographic concept of ‘threshold’ (van Gennep, 1960) or liminality in the context of a ‘rite of passage’, a changing situation relative to the previous or future condition or the societal norm was coined by a former teacher. This threshold concept describes an individual’s or group’s transition as a rite of passage, a defined period or process of change, with a known outcome. From this, Turner (1969) developed the idea that so-called ‘liminal entities’ are transitioning between stable, normal and socially acceptable states:

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (p.95)

Turner explained how such ‘liminal’ individuals might be supported through ‘communitas’, a supportive ‘anti-structure’ of others who may share or have prior experience of the liminal space or phase. Considering the transition to home education, and the supportive individuals or networks my participants seek or
encounter, in the context of liminal theory could be helpful to an understanding of my data.

Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) extend the liminal metaphor to explore how a theory of liminality might apply in modern institutional or organisational settings, specifically to adults’ working lives. Their contention is that the liminal period may be self-initiated, for example, when an individual chooses to seek promotion or change jobs. This contrasts with the traditional ethnographic view of an unavoidable expectation on all peers, where the process and/or duration is well-defined, and the outcome is known in advance. More traditional liminal processes exist in more highly institutionalised settings, including in the structure and hierarchy of a workforce (e.g., Mansaray, 2006). However, they suggest that for the majority of lay people, career trajectories and outcomes are no longer clear-cut. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) concede that ‘liminars’ in this context benefit from a degree of control in this ‘self-guided’ process (p.49). Such ‘liminal entities’ may be ‘betwixt and between,’ but each has a vision of how, if not when, the ‘liminal’ phase will end, for example: a return to the status quo, a new role in the same organisation, a new role in a new organisation, promotion, redundancy, retirement, and so on. In these situations, for adults moving between jobs, liminality is an unavoidable, if acceptable part of the process of transformation. Turner’s ‘obligatory’ becomes Ibarra’s and Obodaru’s ‘voluntary’. My participants, like Turner’s ‘liminal entities’ may have felt they had no alternative; however, they had had no expectation of a liminal process, and did not voluntarily enter such a state.

Whereas liminality within Turner’s ritual process is a socially legitimate stage in a ‘rite of passage’ as described by van Gennep (1960), in Ibarra and Obodaru’s context, ‘liminars’, such as participants in my study, may find themselves in ‘culturally problematic’ situations for extended periods (2016, p.50). Their
theoretical perspective is developed in the career-related context with the suggestion that where Turner’s ritual expects a progressive outcome, their modern ‘liminars’ enter that state with no certainty of resolution. Ibarra and Obodaru suggest that certainty is afforded in Turner’s ritual thanks to highly institutionalised, and therefore predictable, liminal experiences. In their modern career context, however, the under-institutionalised nature of individual experiences makes the outcome unpredictable (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

Ibarra and Obodaru (2016, p.58) consider that institutionalised liminality might be seen in certain modern work contexts through career progression; they argue for a ‘broadening of [the theory’s] contextual reach [...] to cover in-between experiences [...] and serve as an integrated framework to connect these experiences.’ Since most adults may experience such processes in their working lives, one might consider that these events are, nonetheless more ‘institutionalised’ than the experiences of those in my study who find themselves unexpectedly and inevitably outside the school education system.

To apply liminal theory to my study’s data, it is necessary to further extend its contextual reach. As previously mentioned, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016, p.50) mapped Turner’s defined conceptualisations related to liminality and the liminal process to their perceived characteristics of career-related liminality. Their contention was that Turner’s liminal process relies on institutionalisation, whereas in a modern context, the career experiences of individuals tend away from such regimented order. The transitions of participants in my study, who may have expected clear, predictable progression through schools for their children, are less ordered still. Turner’s guided process becomes a self-guided process for Ibarra and Obodaru; my participants may feel the process of transitioning from school is entirely unguided at the outset. Turner’s obligatory, seen as voluntary by Ibarra
and Obodaru, may be involuntary for my study’s participants. This is developed in Chapter 6 and illustrated in Appendix 2 (Table 8).

In developing his conceptualisation of ‘social dramas’, Turner (1974) considered that the processes outlined above needed to be highly institutionalised, ‘baked in’ (my wording) to the society concerned, so that each step of the process was expected, prepared for and supported, if not painless. Without precedent or ‘ritual process’ established in this way, Turner argued there could be no guarantee of successful reintegration. Such processes have been described in the school context, including, typically, from the transition of young children to pre-school (e.g., Ackesjö, 2013) to young people’s passing through high school (e.g., Fasick, 1988). As suggested above, for my participants, liminal processes related to their transition to home education, albeit staged, are unlikely to be institutionalised.

To understand the events and circumstances reported by my participants, I considered these processes through Turner’s (1974) four phases of ‘social drama’:

1. *Breach* of regular, norm-governed social relations (p.38);
2. *Crisis* [...] turning points or moments of danger and suspense, when a true state of affairs is revealed (p.39);
3. *Redressive action* [...] to limit the spread of crisis [that may regress and] become a matter of endemic, pervasive, smouldering factionalism, without sharp, overt confrontations between consistently distinct parties (pp.39-41)
4. *Reintegration* of the disturbed social group or of the social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between the contesting parties (p.41)

Because the data gathered in my research offer the families’ perspective and do not include the views of schools or professionals, this treatment is inevitably one-sided. Acknowledging this, I still believe that these four phases offer a way to explore the progressive, or at times regressive, transitions and processes described by my participants.
Where Turner’s first phase is styled a ‘breach’, for participants in my study, this earliest point might perhaps better be described for my participants as *discord*, since it represents conflict between families and schools. In the context of my thesis, phase four of the ‘social drama’ arguably expects either that children will be ‘reintegrated’ into schools, or that ‘liminars’ will find an alternative that eventually becomes ‘socially recognised’. This would suggest that participants in my study might simply settle at that point. To fully address my research question, it was important for me to also understand how the circumstances around transition and processes begun at school might affect developing home education practices.

Returning to previous studies of home education, practice has been considered in the context, for example, of ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998, in Safran, 2008) and ‘landscapes of practice’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, in Fensham-Smith, 2017).

Whereas I recognised that these could be used to explore families’ evolving practices, the authors’ own contention that ‘landscapes are flat’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.16) dissuaded me as I sought ways to understand the complex and nuanced processes undergone and undertaken by participants in my study. The complexities described in Section 2.3 above include possible loss of trust between parents and teachers (e.g., Bormann & John, 2014), and short supply of expertise and resources in schools and associated children’s services (e.g., Scotcher & Boden, 2018). Notwithstanding the expectations of policy detailed in the same section, like Maxwell et al. (2018), I found no evidence of a community of practice comprised of families, schools and associated services collaborating to avoid, or ease, children’s deregistration from schools.

An exploration of participant data in the context of a ‘heterotopia’ (Pattison, 2015) could encompass both experiences and variability in home education practice that
may, on occasion, appear almost taboo. Nevertheless, this does not seem to fully account for the dimension of time in participant transitions, and their evolving circumstances and practices. Reflecting on ideas related to ‘funds of knowledge’ (González et al., 2005), and the importance both of understanding the local situation and the individual learner, I returned to the familiar work of Vygotsky (1978) and the ZPD discussed by Bowers (2017) in his psychology-focused study of home education. Other studies of home education have considered this model (e.g., Daniels, 2017; Thomas & Pattison, 2013; Rothermel, 2003). Vygotsky hypothesises that learning and reasoning skills benefit from a supportive environment, where children can test out their previous knowledge and proficiency as they acquire new skills. Such facilitation might be expected to resonate with participants in my research.

In my own initial training, the teacher was considered the facilitator. However, it is possible that Vygotsky’s intentions may have been misunderstood as a result of the translation of обучение [ɐbʊtɕˈenʲe] (obuchenie) from the Russian as ‘teaching’ (Cole, 2009). Having studied Russian at undergraduate level, I could not help but consider this further. Didactic ‘teaching’ can be translated into Russian as учение [ʊtɕˈenʲe] (uchenie), whereas обучение has a broader meaning. My preference for interpreting the Russian word in Vygotsky’s facilitating sense, from the prefix об-, is the concept of facilitating learning, closer to the Latin educere, to lead out. This wider environmental facilitation seems to reflect the home education practice observed by Thomas and Pattison (2013). Vygotsky’s focus on the individual, though, did not necessarily account for the overall circumstances, the compounding impact of time, or the wide-ranging experiences of entire families in my study.
Turner’s theory related to ritual process and social drama provides a necessary framework to explicate my participants’ apparent liminal status and the staged processes that they undergo. To account for the multiple influences on their transitions into and within home education, and thereby address my research question more fully, I reflected on teaching, and the work of Bronfenbrenner. According to Bronfenbrenner (1995a), his development of a ‘bioecological systems’ model was the product of evolving work begun in the 1940s, inspired in no small part by the work of fellow Russian-born psychologist, Vygotsky. This theory, and a resulting model incorporating ‘process-person-context-time’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1995b), its developments and adaptations have - like Turner’s - been applied in many fields.

Bronfenbrenner (1995b, p.620) proposed that human development relies on ‘proximal processes’, ongoing interactions between the individual and people within their ‘microsystem’, their immediate environments. The inclusion of objects and activities, as well as people in this model to some extent mirrors Vygotsky’s ZPD, and the concept of a ‘more knowledgeable other’. Bronfenbrenner’s model goes beyond this, to acknowledge the impacts when such benefits as are offered by the ZPD are absent, or if interactions are not supportive. These proximal processes have potential to be ‘positive’, resulting in ‘competence’ and typical progress or development, or ‘negative’, resulting in ‘dysfunction’ or atypical - more limited development - cognitively and/or socially (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p.118). Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) reflected further on role that time - Bronfenbrenner’s ‘chronosystem’ - plays in this process. Duration and frequency can improve or worsen the impact of interactions within an individual’s microsystem, and those occurring, facilitated or absent between other systems in the model (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).
In my experience, this elaboration of the process-person-context-time model is one that is not always fully explored in education-related literature, which often seems to focus on Bronfenbrenner’s earlier ‘ecological’ model. However, the bioecological model, including the chronosystem and the effects of process-person-context time, seem necessary to explore both the complex school experiences and the home education developments of participants in my study. These have potential to offer a deeper understanding of the impacts of complex and evolving relationships between children and their peers, teachers, parents and professionals, and between families, schools and other ‘actors’ prior to deregistration. This model may also offer a way to understand families’ early development of networks and practices in home education.

Norwich (2016) draws parallels with a biopsychosocial model; Garcia and Ortiz (2013) consider both the bioecological systems model and ‘funds of knowledge’ (González, 2005) appropriate and underutilised by researchers investigating ‘special education’. Beyond the suggestions of Rucinski et al. (2018) that the theory is useful to understand relationships between children and teachers, Carr-Fanning and McGuckin (2017) contend that as well as in inclusive education practice, the bioecological model lends itself to both design and analysis of research in the field of inclusion. Relevant to my research, is the application of the model by Leitão et al. (2017) to help them understand families’ experiences of children’s school-based learning difficulties, and the impact of a diagnosis. They note that teachers and school settings have potential, within the mesosystem, to facilitate, or hinder, interaction between systems and microsystems on behalf of children and families. As with concepts of liminality, the theory has been extended to modern contexts; Flewitt and Clark (2020) adapted the model to reflect young children’s experience of networked interactions in online environments. This
application may be particularly appropriate for participants in my study, who actively use the Internet in their home education practice.

Despite this apparent adaptability, the bioecological systems model has, in the past, often been used to focus on children without explicitly recognising their capabilities as actors with agency. Children described in resulting work may have appeared as subjects rather than active participants. I would suggest that this has perhaps been an oversight on the part of authors whose conviction that children’s rights were front and centre in their work meant they believed the children’s active role was implicit. Such perceived two-dimensional application has drawn criticism. Referring only to an earlier model, Christensen (2010) suggests that Bronfenbrenner does not consider interactions within the microsystem, or for the individual at the centre to develop, as a result of interactions within and between systems. Houston (2017) similarly critiques Bronfenbrenner for the limitations of the individual within the model. I would question whether Christensen (2010) and Houston (2017) have read Bronfenbrenner’s later work, as would seem appropriate to their publication dates. Neither of these consider Bronfenbrenner’s (1995b) ‘proximal processes’ that serve to understand the impact of interactions between children and those in their microsystems. Bronfenbrenner describes the individual ‘as an active agent in, and on, its environment’ (1995a, p.634). This individual agency aligns well with my ethical intentions towards my study’s participants and their data. Tudge et al. (2009) consider that partial application of the eventual model or use of an earlier version should be explicitly declared by researchers. In the case of the home education practices and processes undertaken by participants in my study, I envisage that the Bronfenbrenner (1995a, 1995b) bioecological systems model incorporating proximal processes
and the dimensions of process-person-context-time might best serve to understand this aspect of my research data.

2.5 Summary

This chapter’s exploration of the legal framework related to UK home education and the legislation surrounding special education provides context to the circumstances which my research seeks to understand. Research focused on home education presents a frame of reference for my study and highlights a gap in the current literature that my thesis aims to fill. Studies of parent-teacher relationships offer insight into the interactions, negotiations, and disagreements reported by my participants. Empirical works examining the fields of home education, special education, and school-family relations, including some less positive perspectives, confirm that certain of the circumstances parents such as those in my study find themselves in are perhaps common. Although few parents might expect a need to navigate all three landscapes concurrently, for participants in my study, this potentially precarious path may, at times, have seemed like an inescapable aspect of their lives.

Finally, theoretical frameworks have been considered for their relevance and application to my data. Whereas earlier research has recognised home educators as operating outside the socially accepted norms (e.g., Pattison, 2015; Watt 2012), no studies were found that applied theories of liminality, communitas and the stages of social drama (Turner, 1969; 1974). Possibly, this reflects my study’s specific focus on the circumstances, processes, and transitions of families from school, into and within home education. These concepts are used in my study to understand how families undertake, or sometimes undergo, such experiences. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems model is proposed as a complementary framework to understand why circumstances develop and the practices that evolve.
from these processes. Previous studies have discussed the practice of home educating families from a social cultural Vygotskian perspective (e.g., Daniels, 2020; Rothermel, 2002), and Bowers (2017) extended this to a bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Congruent perspectives offered by ‘communitas’ (Turner’s, 1969) and ‘mesosystem’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1995a) support my understanding of relationships within both the school environment and the home educating population. Locating children and their families at the centre of theory and my thesis in this way also accords with my ethical position.
3. Methodology and methods

My epistemological position recognises that participants’ words are based on their lived experiences; for my interviewees and survey respondents these are to a considerable extent culturally defined by individual family experiences and the UK education system. For this reason, and to promote, epistemic reflexivity, it is also important to acknowledge the potential for my own past to unintentionally impact upon the research both ontologically and epistemologically. This includes my background as a classroom teacher and later a learning support specialist, as well as my experience as a parent to children with additional needs, and even as a learner whose own early education was repeatedly interrupted, including by two periods entirely outside school. The interpretivist, transactional approach of my research recognises that, ontologically, perceptions of this reality can be as unique as the individual.

The initial research methodology and design arose from these factors. I consulted with individuals who had experience of both school and home education for their children with additional needs to design the survey questionnaire and interview schedule, meaning that their perspectives have been incorporated into my study. Methods of data collection were sought and planned, with participants in mind, to be accessible, convenient, considerate and ethical. My application of reflexive thematic analysis, systematically and iteratively, was intended to enhance this process.

Co-production, as expected by the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015), is a collaborative process between young people, their parents, professionals and educational settings. In research, Thomas-Hughes (2018) suggests that co-production has the potential to redress power imbalance between researcher and
participant community. This resonated with my experience as a parent and specialist teacher whose work focuses on building a common understanding of strengths and needs and to implement, review and adapt the content and form of any support appropriately. My intention as a researcher, therefore, was to ensure my research methods were both respectful and reliable.

3.1 Research design

Table 2 Overview of methods and data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Parent participants</th>
<th>Direct child participants</th>
<th>Data collected and artefacts shared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online survey (UK wide)</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Written responses (68,513 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Recorded interview, Transcripts (7378 words), Concept map, Email exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family visits with researcher participation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Recorded interviews, Transcripts (50035 words), Field notes, Concept maps, Email exchange, Photographs/letters seen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent interviews</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Recorded interviews, Transcripts (11958 words), Field notes, Email exchange, Photographs/letters seen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The methods of data collection were through:

- questions - the survey and interviews;
- observations recorded in field notes during interactions with the families through interviewing, creation of concept maps and my immersion and participation in the planned days out;
- analysis of the concept maps and artefacts shared by the families, such as photographs and letters.

As indicated in Chapter 1, my motivation for undertaking the study came from contact with families where one or more children had previously attended school.
This began to inform the research question, distilled from the initial set of questions from my original proposal written in 2017:

What circumstances inform the transitions of families to and within home education?

As noted in Chapter 1, it was anticipated that further lines of enquiry would develop. These related to circumstances informing the perception of parents that a school or schools may not be able to meet their children’s needs and included the processes of families as they developed their home education practice.

These are personal and potentially sensitive data; the survey and interview schedule sought responses to particular, albeit open, questions, that parents might find difficult to answer. Therefore, both for ethical reasons, and to enable respondents to participate in their own way, no question in the schedule was compulsory. It was important to me that participants could share their experiences confidently and in as much detail as they chose. This might include the circumstances leading to deregistration or, for some, to not enrolling in the first place. Beyond deregistration, to understand families’ experiences more fully, it was helpful to explore circumstances related to their developing and established home education practices. I aspired to include children as active participants, not least because they are the reason for home education practice. All of this was important to me as an inclusive practitioner and researcher, and in consideration of children’s agency and rights.

Although the home educating population can be wary of researchers (e.g., Fensham-Smith, 2017), it was possible to make contact and invite participation through parents’ often well-developed social media networks. Participants for both the survey and interviews were recruited through online invitations posted on Twitter, in closed Facebook groups for parents of children with ‘SEND’ and in my
blog. I address ethical questions related to my online presence in the next section. My settings for these social media and blog posts were not private, so that links could be copied and shared by people and groups on social media. The face-to-face interview participants contacted me in response seeing one or more posts on social media. Three home educating parents contacted me directly enquiring about participation in interviews as a result of seeing my university email address in the participant information of the survey. One of these went on to join the study as a Skype interview participant.

An initial reason for planning online participation was that my personal and professional experience had already indicated that home educating parents are notably active users of the Internet for learning resources and to network with the wider home educating community, as was anticipated by Meighan (1997) and more recently described by Fensham-Smith (2017). This, and the fact that previous research focused on home education where at least one child has ‘SEND’ has typically been conducted via surveys (for example, Parsons and Lewis, 2010), confirmed to me that an online survey would be an appropriate means of data collection.

I was familiar with survey design, dissemination and data analysis, having used this successfully in past research (Gillie, 2016). Notwithstanding my confidence in the method, I was mindful that previous studies have highlighted the diversity of home educating parents’ experiences (e.g., Safran, 2008; Rothermel, 2003). For my study to reflect such diversity, a survey would need to ensure that participants’ contributions were not limited by closed questions. That some past home education research design may unintentionally have influenced, or limited findings

---

4 Settings for the blog and on Twitter were public; Facebook posts linked to my blog, which was then shareable, whereas the Facebook post itself, within the closed group, was not.
has been discussed by Spiegler (2010), for example, the inclusion of checklists or Likert Scales in a survey inevitably produced data related to those more defined items. The methodological design needed to ensure participants could share their accounts as fully as they wished. As noted in Chapter 1, through open questions, I planned to collect ‘thick’ detail for analysis (Latzko-Toth et al., 2016). These elicited the hoped for ‘rich’ participant response data discussed by Fusch and Ness (2015). The survey was intended to provide an in-depth understanding of families’ experiences and decisions, and of the processes they had undergone while considering, beginning and developing their home education practice.

It was expected that the survey would be convenient for the many home educators who confidently use the Internet. However, a survey completed by parents would not sufficiently address the fact that children’s views are often missing from both home education and ‘SEND’ related research. I therefore developed a research strategy that could incorporate participants’ learning activities outside their homes, where home education activities appear often to take place. Importantly for the aspect of my research focused on families’ transitions within home education, this would provide an opportunity to meet and observe children interacting and learning together and to better understand how such home education practices were facilitated, following deregistration.

The online questionnaire, using largely open questions, gathered data from a UK-wide participant base. The personal accounts shared by these participants gave the potential to add breadth through national perspectives, where the five case studies resulting from face-to-face meetings would provide a richness to the data and a depth of understanding that might not otherwise be possible. Furthermore, my plan was that these interviews and observations would include the children’s own views first-hand.
Mixing methods in this way enabled my study to gain case study depth and survey breadth to address my research question. The survey was able to capture a range of families’ past experiences, the processes they underwent and the transitions that resulted, as well as to indicate the frequency and commonality of such circumstances. Despite its open questions, and the detail that many participants generously shared, responses to a survey questionnaire may lack the depth afforded through interview with a human researcher. The case studies provided an opportunity to establish accurate timelines with participants and to extend questions where this was necessary and appropriate. This helped me gain a deeper understanding of my interviewees’ experiences, and the circumstance leading to their decisions and developing practices. All of this made it possible to build on earlier family-centred research findings in the literature.

As I began to draft the questions for the survey and semi-structured interview schedule, respect and honesty were at the forefront of my mind. A method to conceive relevant, respectful questions was developed, based on two ideas. The first concerned what is asked and for whom, and the intrinsic respect and validity of inviting members of the population of interest to co-produce questions (OHCHR, 2018). Parents’ participation should ideally reflect their lived experience and the issues that matter to them, whether through online survey response or face-to-face.

Co-production, the involvement of stakeholders in the design and provision of services, has come to be expected in areas of UK education as already discussed. It can be seen, for example, in the many public consultations preparing for the ALN Code for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021). At the local level, the role of parents in their children’s school-based education has been considered co-productive (e.g., Honingh et al., 2018). In research, Thomas-Hughes (2018)
suggests that co-production has the potential to redress power imbalance between researcher and participant community. Whereas the researcher as interviewer may guide the research conversation, Mann (2010) considers that interactive, qualitative interviews can result in co-produced accounts. Such opportunities for co-production may not be afforded by a survey questionnaire. For this reason, it was decided to employ a co-productive method to design the interview schedule, and to use the same questions for the survey. This exercise was envisaged as an authentic way to ensure my questions were both appropriate and relatable for participants, whether they were interviewed or responding to the survey.

I had come to know several home educating parents locally, and online, through my participation in ‘SEND’ networks for parents and professionals. I invited four of these parents to participate in drafting the questions, and all chose to contribute. Although integral to the research design, this was not a research activity per se. The consulting parents were already aware of my study and had indicated their support to me directly before their interest in co-producing the schedule of questions was gauged. They were acting in an advisory capacity.

The second method, a way of refining these draft questions, was based on a meta-planning focus group technique, where participants are invited to respond to questions individually, before responses are shared with the group. Individuals vote for responses that interest and resonate with them, which form the basis of the subsequent discussion (for a more detailed explanation, see Roland et al., 2015). My adaptation of this method is illustrated in Figure 1.
Arguably, this was not true co-production, or indeed meta-planning, since, to protect their privacy, none of the parents were told who else was contributing. In each case, I asked them to define what they themselves would like to be asked, and what, when they had been contemplating or just begun home education, they would have liked to have heard from other parents who had experienced similar situations. I spoke with each individually, by telephone or Skype. During our individual consultations, questions were drafted, following which contributors had time to reflect before sharing three to five chosen questions with me. I collated these and amalgamated some that were very similar before sharing them with the group members individually. This was the first time that any parent had seen another’s question. At this stage, I asked each parent to consider the wording and whether questions should be added, removed, replaced, or reworked. Through this process of sharing the collaborating parents’ questions, they were refined or combined, and all four parents agreed my wording of the final questions, which were incorporated into the survey and formed the basis of the face-to-face interview schedule. These are included in Appendix 3.

By using co-created questions for both the case studies and the online survey, my research is intended to reflect the truths of families who might have experienced similar processes and transitions, and to balance power with those participating. Co-production in education, including home education, has been described as
democratic (Lees, 2010) and in this sense the design elements are considered compatible with the open approach to gathering data for my research. Although teachers' views were beyond the scope of my study, as mentioned in Chapter 1, a frame of reference might perhaps be provided through the participation of parents who are also experienced educators, including qualified teachers, across a range of settings. This is reported on in Chapter 4.

3.1.1 Integrating methods

One purpose of the survey’s open questions was to provide participants with an opportunity to relate their experiences in their own words and in as much or as little detail as they wished. Nevertheless, this was a manifestly structured process. Although the semi-structured interview schedule contained the same questions, their order depended on interviewees responses. This meant that, although the interview began at the same point as the questionnaire, a participant’s response would sometimes lead to information being shared that might otherwise have been elicited through a later question. For example, one parent began by briefly explaining that her family had been introduced to home education when her eldest child was in Year 4 at school. She then reflected on a series of events that had taken place through her daughter's school-based education, starting four years earlier. In such cases, for the conversation to continue naturally, it was not always appropriate to simply return to the next question in the schedule. Instead, such discussions were continued as naturally as possible, with suitable questions from the schedule threaded through the conversation, until the participant had shared their history to their own satisfaction, and the questions had been addressed, whether or not they were posed directly.

As the research design was developed, I referred to Plowright’s (2011) framework for an ‘integrated methodology’ which, as well as allowing for the collection of
‘narrative’ data through open questions, expects the collection of ‘numerical’ data via closed questioning. My study’s design deviates from this in that, with the exception of limited closed demographic questions, numerical data were collected via responses to open questions. The aggregation of such numerical data required very close analysis of the survey responses, which was useful to understand how participants construct meaning from the processes and transitions of their circumstances and practices. Plowright (2011) considers that this level of detail in analysis is one benefit of such an integrated methodology.

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the initial methods of data collection were through questions, observations and analysis. At times, methods may have been further broken down at each step. For example, each interview with children led to both a recording and a concept map. The recordings were transcribed, and the family received those and the concept maps to review. The returned artefacts, with any revisions or additions, were combined with my field note observations, all of which enabled me to write four family case studies. These were returned to each family for re-checking. The final documents for each study, and my different research experiences in each case, offered opportunities to discover and consider inter- and intra-family themes.

3.2 Ethical considerations

The study was designed in accordance with the British Educational Research Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2018) and the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014). The research methods: design, recruitment of participants and wording of the survey, participant information and consent documentation and procedure for withdrawal were reviewed and approved by the OU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Withdrawal was possible from the survey at any point to submission, whereupon data were automatically
anonymised. Withdrawal from face-to-face participation was possible up to a date agreed with each participating family, by which point transcripts, case study content and the children’s concept-maps had been shared and agreed through participant-checking (see 3.2.1, Participant-checking).

The study’s data collection and storage are GDPR-compliant, and the research has been registered with OU data protection. Hard copies of documents were stored in a locked filing cabinet, digital files were uploaded and stored on the University’s OneDrive. Where it was not possible to give participants physical copies of their transcripts and other documents, these were password protected before being transmitted electronically. A project risk assessment matrix was completed and subject to ongoing review as part of the above processes. My DBS enhanced certificate is for the child and adult workforce, and I am registered with the update service, which ensures that the check is both current and portable. I am a member of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and have consulted and been guided by the Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (AoIR, 2019), in particular during the survey data analysis phase.

It was necessary to acknowledge the risk that my various roles of researcher, teacher and parent might create an imbalance of power in my research. Although my own ethical stance would not have permitted me to take advantage of it, I stepped back from my volunteer role as a trainer and speaker for a local autism charity, to avoid any impact to attendees, other members or volunteers. Conscious of the potential for my, albeit small, online profile to influence possible participants, I reduced my social media presence. Prior to beginning my research, I had delivered a number of webinars for parents of children interested in supporting their children’s needs, but I stopped this in the summer of 2018 for the same reason. Over the past several years, I had tutored or assessed for specific learning
difficulties a small number of home educated children, but I did not invite these families to participate in my research. Survey participation was open, and some of these contacts may have responded to the survey; such participation is anonymous, and I have not sought to identify anyone. I have endeavoured to remain alert to ethical issues throughout the process of conducting my research as is noted within this thesis.

It was important to me, ethically, that my research did not inadvertently contribute to any marginalisation of potentially already vulnerable participants, as described by Garcia and Ortiz (2013). At the design stage and throughout, I aimed to avoid such risks. I was conscious that home educators have, over time, repeatedly been treated with a degree of opprobrium in the UK mainstream media, as discussed in the past (by e.g., Morton, 2011; Lees 2010). Such misconceptions were evident during this study’s data collection period (e.g., Channel 4, 2019). Garcia and Ortiz (2013) counsel that ‘intersectionality’ should be considered and respected by researchers. Such intersectionality, for example members of minority ethnic and religious groups who are also home educators and therefore perceived as operating outside society’s accepted norms, has been noted in the home education literature (e.g., Bhopal & Myers, 2018; Burke, 2007). This was observable in participants’ responses, for example, related to their position as home educators whose children’s disability rights were not met, and to factors such as poverty.

In keeping with the study’s aims and because voluntary, informed consent is an essential part of any research involving families and children, information sheets and consent forms were shared electronically ahead of the initial in-person or online meetings. Examples of these are in Appendices 4 and 5. This was intended to give the family members time to consider questions, and indeed participation,
ahead of our meeting. At the first meeting, information sheets were shared again, and I, or a parent, read the information sheet with each child. All participants were invited to ask additional questions. Pseudonyms were assigned by participant selection, by the participant choosing between three randomly picked pre-prepared name cards. Parents were able to guide children should they need help, or to eliminate pseudonyms that they felt might not sufficiently anonymise the family’s participation. In line with the study’s ethical intentions and for transparency, the timeline, date and procedure for withdrawal were highlighted on each occasion.

Three meetings in total were planned for each family:

1. the introduction, where hard copies of the participant information and consent were shared and signed;
2. the planned day out; and finally
3. the follow-up meeting, to agree accounts in person after transcripts and scanned concept-maps had been shared electronically.

All participants received copies of their information sheet and signed consent form, and children additionally were given a copy of their concept maps. Due to COVID-19, some adaptation was necessary. This is detailed in the next section.

3.2.1 Participant-checking

As indicated above, interviewed participants received copies of their transcript and their children’s concept maps. As well as validating their participation, the children’s concept maps were intended as a means of encoding participant information in a way that would be accessible and useful to them as well as for the research (Plowright, 2011). It was originally intended that, as well as the transcripts and concept maps, participants would receive my full chronologically presented case study report compiled from their interview in advance of a follow-up meeting where accounts would be agreed. However, this was not possible in all
cases, due initially to participants’ busy lives and later because of the COVID-19 lockdown. Where a final meeting in person was not possible, participants received their encrypted documents electronically, and follow-up discussions were variously conducted by email, telephone or Skype, to suit each participant.

This enabled participants to remove details they may have, on reflection, preferred not to have shared. Interviewees were able to ensure that they had been understood and accurately represented, and, on occasion, having recalled further information in the retelling and reading of their own accounts, add any details that were important to them. This met my own ethical standards and was in keeping with the co-creation of questions for the survey and interview schedule.

Additionally, I was able to ask further questions to clarify my own understanding, as recommended by Chase (2017) and Birt et al. (2016).

Notwithstanding the caveat that such exercises can limit the researcher’s potential to synthesise the data (e.g., Varpio et al., 2017), it was intended that this type of ethical, collaborative and iterative research practice should help to maintain epistemic reflexivity. This was especially important to me, given the problematic relationships with teachers reported by deregistering parents in the literature (e.g., Kendal & Taylor, 2016, Wray & Thomas, 2013) and by respondents in my survey.

In the main, interview participants made no changes; one parent removed occupation details they thought might make them identifiable, another added details that they felt were important. Three of the seven parents who were interviewed described the experience of talking through their experiences and reading the resulting transcript and extended case study as positive and cathartic.

Birt et al. (2016) consider that the gold standard for this participant-checking is to conduct these after the data have been synthesised. This was not appropriate for
my study for a number of reasons, not least the high proportion of anonymous and uncontactable survey participants and the heterogeneity of the home educating population (Rothermel, 2003). Chase (2017) calls the process of returning to participants for review of not only transcripts but of the case study narrative ‘enhanced member checking’ and considers it a collaborative process which can guard against the researcher misrepresenting participants’ experiences. Two participants subsequently requested to be re-sent electronic copies, one as a keepsake and one to use as an aide memoire in a meeting. Plowright (2011, p.135) describes these types of effect as ‘empowering’ and ‘catalytic’ products of authenticity in research practice. It was important to me that home educating participants were, and considered themselves, accurately represented, not least because I may be viewed with caution, both as a researcher and as a teacher whose own children were school educated.

3.3 Survey

The electronic survey was designed with an expanding text box for each of the co-created questions using Jisc Online Surveys,5 GDPR-compliant specialist research and education online survey software. Whilst the package offered fewer aesthetically pleasing design options than surveys I had used previously, it was easy to use for me as a survey designer, and, most importantly, for participants to complete. Each entry was automatically allocated a unique and anonymous respondent ID. No email addresses or other identifying data were collected.

Ethically, it was essential that potential survey respondents could make an informed decision regarding whether or not to participate. Before answering any questions, participants were given information explaining the aim of the research.

5 https://www.jisc.ac.uk
and what was involved. This was followed by further information related to taking part, use of information and consent. After consent was given, there was no required response for any subsequent question. When the survey closed, data were downloaded in Microsoft Excel format. UK participants provided responses totalling 68,513 words. Excluding answers to the demographic questions, responses averaged 715 words and ranged from 93 to 2,370 words per participant.

Email contact information for myself and my supervisors was provided for anyone requiring additional information prior to completing the survey. Just one prospective participant contacted me with such questions: a group administrator for a very large, closed Facebook group for UK home educators. The survey had been shared there, presumably by another participant. This individual, a postdoctoral academic, had been asked to contact me and determine whether the ‘research question, methodology and potential impact’ of the study meant that the survey was one they could share further, as they ‘don’t usually allow surveys.’ I provided the requested information by email. In the message of thanks at the end of the survey, my university email address was given again for participants wishing to sign up for updates on the research or for further participation in the study via interview. A small number of participants contacted me in this way and let me know that they had shared the survey amongst their local home education groups.

The survey was intended to capture qualitative data related to the lived experience of individuals, their processes and decisions through open questions. Reflecting the strengths-based model of inclusive practice and avoiding pathologising as discussed by Weaver (2020), no question required information to be shared regarding children’s specific needs or diagnoses. Demographic questions were required to use the University’s standard statistical language and groupings for
areas of the UK and ethnicity, which could be selected via a drop-down menu, with the additional option for participants to use their own words. Open questions were used for the remaining demographic items. These responses are missing for three participants; two did not answer them at all, and one provided only their location.

The survey was originally disseminated via a link on Twitter, in my blog, and in closed Facebook groups for home educators and for parents of children with ‘SEND’. I used Messenger to contact the group administrators and introduce myself and the research and to ask whether they would be willing to share the survey in their groups. The survey link was shared on from these locations, as with the group described above. The response rate from such administrators was variable, with a largely positive response from groups supporting parents with ‘SEND’ related issues and from smaller home education groups led by an individual administrator. Where closed home educators’ groups had more than 1000 members and several administrators, with no reference to ‘SEND’ in their group description, I received no response, possibly due to the caution reported by previous researchers from potential home educating participants (e.g., Fensham-Smith, 2017; Rothermel, 2002). The survey went ‘live’ in the week following the Dispatches documentary (Channel 4, 2019) mentioned in Chapter 1. This had been expected to celebrate home educators' efforts, yet was perceived to undermine them, which may account for such moderators' being wary of sharing information with a researcher.

3.4 Face-to-face participation

Of the seven parent interviewees, four participated with their children. These parents spoke to me in their homes, three with their children present, and one with the children nearby. In my hearing, the parents asked their children where they preferred to be and invited them to play or study elsewhere in the house. The
environment was familiar for me; visiting families in their homes and observing children and young people in both everyday and unusual situations is a significant feature of my working practice as a specialist teacher. Parents and their children seemed mindful of whose ‘turn’ it was to speak, when both were present; nevertheless, as one participant recounted an event or experience, often the other family member would recall additional details, or be reminded of something they had not mentioned previously. In this way, the families also could be seen to collaborate in their responses as described by Reczek (2014).

Beyond certain facts in the recounted stories, one similarity between parents' behaviour toward their children was observable to me. As they spoke to me, the three parents whose children had remained present often looked to their children. At times, they asked permission to divulge particular facts, at others they seemed to be assessing the children’s reaction to their responses, apparently to gauge whether to continue or change course. In fact, the children, did not object or correct, but occasionally added details of their own. One parent felt that the information she wanted to share might be unsettling for her child to hear and relive and emailed it to me instead following our interview. Reczek (2014) considers that such sensitive information is sometimes easier for participants to share individually.

A walking interview technique (Clark & Emmel, 2010) was used with one of the three parent-only participants; this was most convenient for the busy interviewee. Additional walking interviews were planned when my field visits took place during families’ learning outside the home. Of the four families whose children participated, one interview was conducted entirely online, via Skype. This was an unexpected change from the original research design due to the pandemic and the impossibility of meeting face-to-face at the time. This change was anticipated in
March 2020 and approved by the University’s Ethics Committee shortly ahead of the first lockdown.

3.4.1 The planned day out

The idea to join families learning outside the home was inspired by the walking interview technique; such a hybrid research technique has been described as ‘shadowing’ or as ‘go-alongs’ (Evans & Jones, 2011). The method was chosen for its compatibility with my study’s democratic aims, as it should allow participants a degree of ownership of the research process. The intention was that interviews conducted in this way would be easier for the participants to fit into their day-to-day lives (Clark & Emmel, 2010). Riley and Holton (2016) agree with Clark and Emmel (2010) that discussions conducted on the move can be more extensive and revealing than a room-based interview. The planned days out that I was invited to join were activities that the participants had intended to participate in and where the organiser and other families involved had consented to my participation as a researcher. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, the research was able to incorporate just two planned days out. These provided opportunities for observation as well as adding insight, as both parents related details of their home education experiences with the children often in sight but out of hearing. As well as observing and recording, by taking part in these learning activities, I was at times a participant in the study.

Participant observation is a familiar technique for me as a teacher and learning support specialist as well as from past research with children and their teachers in school. Beyond my own personal ethical position and legal or ethical considerations related to safeguarding, observing children’s behaviour, their interactions with each other, their parents or teachers in an objective manner is central to my training and the professional and ethical standards and codes of
practice I must meet in my work (BDA, 2020; Dyslexia Guild, 2018; Patoss, 2018). In my professional practice, I routinely observe children as part of assessment; this objectivity was also essential to my research.

I was very aware of the need to maintain both epistemic reflexivity and my ethical stance as a researcher with regards to both participants in my study and those they might interact with during the day. For each participant, their right to withdraw was highlighted at the point of recruitment, at the start and end of each interview and at the point of participant-checking. Regardless of the right to withdraw, had a participant at any stage shown signs of distress, I would have stopped the interview. Beyond professional standards, as a teacher with experience in early years, I am attuned to the ways in which children in particular can demonstrate that they would rather not participate or be observed. Ethically, I would not consider participation by an individual showing such signs to be consenting. Beyond the already mentioned procedures related to participants’ right to withdraw, I advised and reminded each participant that they could take a break or stop the interview at any point, and for any reason. In fact, only occasional comfort breaks were taken by participants. At times, recounted episodes affected me as a teacher, or a parent, and I found it necessary to arrange participant meetings sufficiently far apart both to ensure objectivity and to give myself time and space to transcribe the interviews and produce the extended case studies for participant-checking. All of this informed my practice as a researcher.

3.4.2 Piloting the questions and methods

The face-to-face participation method described above was piloted with one family. Initial recruitment followed a parent’s response to my call for participation on Facebook. The pilot parent interview and interviews with children, including the concept map exercise progressed as planned. However, due to the venue and the
weather on the planned day out, it was not possible to interview additional parents to extend the piloting of the questions. For this reason, interviews were arranged with three further parents on separate occasions. Having tested the questions in this way, they were incorporated into the survey. Responses from the first fifteen survey participants were reviewed to determine whether the questions should be adjusted for the survey. Participant responses were sufficiently detailed to confirm the questions were appropriate and would be effective in eliciting responses. I had re-evaluated the questions with a view to possibly adjusting these, following feedback on my initial study report; however, by that point, over 80 participants had responded to the survey and so no changes were made.

**3.5 Children’s participation**

One young person, a GCSE student who did not disclose her age, participated directly in the online survey. Whilst the questionnaire had been designed for parents, the young person’s data have been included in the study. As already stated, listening to and valuing children’s and young people’s voices is intrinsic to my ethical stance. Plowright (2011, p.135) describes equality of participation as ‘fairness’, a key aspect of authenticity in research. Furthermore, it is in keeping with the right of children and young people to participate and make their views known as described by Alderson and Morrow (2020) and required by the UNCRC (UN, 1989).

Six further children from four families participated in interviews; three children from one family and one from another each additionally attended one of the planned days out. Children were interviewed in their homes; five were interviewed in person and one via Skype. The parents, all mothers, asked their children whether they wanted to be present during the parent interview. Three children from one family chose to learn or play in another room. These three sisters later each chose
to speak with me without direct parent supervision, a choice offered to them by their mother. This allowed her to work with the other children in an adjacent room. The door remained open, and the siblings came and went throughout their sisters’ interviews. Of the three remaining participating families, each child stayed with their parent as we spoke, sometimes drifting away to find an item they wanted to use or show me, sometimes interjecting with a comment related to the discussion at hand. These same three children were interviewed with their parents present.

Children’s views were elicited via unstructured interviews, using concept maps as an accessible way to record and confirm child voice, based on two question areas linked to my two-part research question:

- *Please tell me about what being at school and learning at school was like for you.*
- *What can you tell me about learning at home or on visits out with your family?*

The families all received full interview transcripts, along with their own resulting chronologically presented case history, and copies of the children’s concept maps, and they had control over what was to be included in the study.

An information sheet was designed to be child-accessible and approved (Appendix 4); this was given to the children to read and keep, but also read to them by a parent or by me as the researcher, where appropriate. Each child was invited to ask me questions and part of the early research conversation was devoted to explaining the purpose of the research. This was described as: to understand how they came to be home educated and how they learned, and it was explained that their stories would be written for other people to read. All of this was necessary before consent could be considered to have been given on an informed basis, and to observe the children’s rights as described in the UNCRC (UN, 1989). Alderson and Morrow (2020) consider that parental consent can protect both children and
researchers; however, parental consent alone is not sufficient in social research. I explained that, with their permission, our conversation would be audio recorded and that I would transcribe this and provide them with a copy. I took care to advise them that they could stop at any time and that they were free to change their minds about participation that day, or later as described in Sections 3.2.1 (p.73) and 3.4.1 (p.79).

Alderson and Morrow (2020, p.176) suggest that the researcher approach of relating to children and young people as ‘participants who share in partnerships when defining and solving problems’, as I aspired to in my study, is under-utilised. It was important to me as a researcher, to the study’s underlying ethics, and again with regard for the UNCRC that child participants should also be able to tell me openly what they thought. Equally, they should have an accessible record of their contribution, for them to easily agree or amend, and to keep. I explained to the children that the concept maps would be used as a way to record what they had told me, and for them to check that they were happy with their contribution to my research. These types of diagrammatical representations are something I have used often in learning situations with children. A method was conceived from this to provide children with clear and accessible artefacts for participant-checking, as the presentation of written transcripts would be inappropriate for younger children and learners not yet reading confidently. An example is shown in Figure 2 below. The study’s and my own epistemic reflexivity remained a focus throughout, not least because this joint creation can also be seen as appropriate for participant research. I was conscious both of my position as researcher and the possibility of being seen as a teacher.
Carr-Fanning and McGuckin (2017) found that such a method of co-creation emerged organically as they conducted child-centred research where participants were children diagnosed with a neurological condition resulting in specific learning difficulties. Their argument that research methods should suit the child resonated with my ethical stance. Their contention that a mixed verbal and visual approach, where the interview is conducted as the artefact is created, reflected my own experience as a learning support teacher. From this, a method was developed to record the child participants’ accounts beyond their verbal responses to my questions, our interactions, and the subsequent transcript and case history.

Information related to the planned concept mapping was included in the participant information. There was no expectation that the families should provide resources for these, but my knowledge of children’s potential difficulties or sensitivities meant that I was prepared for children or parents to choose to use their own materials, whether for adaptive, accessibility reasons, allergy or sensory sensitivity, or
personal preference. I brought with me: individual whiteboards and pens; a selection of paper and card; a range of graphite and colouring pencils and pens; including triangular, notched and left-handed writing materials; a variety of different size and colour post-it notes and card shapes; sticky dots and glue sticks. Additionally, my tablet had the mapping app Inspiration\(^6\) installed. All of this was of course hoped to be enjoyable rather than demanding for the children, but I was aware that any of them might have preferred not to engage in this part of the research. If that had been the case, they would not have been expected to join in the creation of a concept map, and they would have been offered the choice as to whether I should create one for them based on their interview, if indeed they wished to participate in the research.

Three participants chose to create their concept maps from the materials I had brought, and two used the tablet app. For two participants who were not yet confident to write independently, I scribed. Of the children choosing hand-made concept maps, one created a single document, and two chose to make one each for school and home education. As well as providing these three participants with photographic images of their original creations, I recreated the five hand-made concept maps following our interviews incorporating their drawings into a digital document with an easy-read typeface, as shown for the example above (Figure 2) in Figure 3 below.

The Skype participant chose her template, and I subsequently used the app to record key points from her interview in a diagram, which was sent electronically for participant-checking. I had created simple templates in the app but also invited the participants to choose one of the app’s templates or make their own, if they preferred. Both of the remaining face-to-face participants designed their own

\(^{6}\) [https://www.inspiration-at.com/inspiration-maps/]
concept maps: one made separate diagrams for school and home and the other combined both settings in one concept map. Examples are included in Appendix 6.

Figure 3 Example of digital concept map representation

Novak and Cañas (2007, p.29) define concept maps as ‘graphical tools for organizing and representing relationships between concepts indicated by a connecting line linking two concepts.’ This design uses an arranged hierarchy, from general, overarching ideas at the top, noting interrelated concepts and becoming more specific below. Whilst this makes for a clear, easily understood diagram, it was important to the study’s ethical aims that my methods should suit the child participants rather than the reverse, as discussed by Carr-Fanning and McGuckin (2016). Novak and Cañas (2016) indicate that concept mapping has potential to concisely reflect in a single page an interview transcribed over many pages, having been created from that transcript. The inclusion of synchronous co-construction in my study means that the method diverts manifestly from Novak’s intentions, though arguably with similar results. My flexible approach to concept mapping aimed to respect the participants’ ideas as well as the pure method.
3.6 Interviews and transcription

Interviews used the previously described schedule of questions and were recorded with the participants’ consent using a digital voice recorder for face-to-face meetings, and via the record function in Skype for remote interviews. In total, 12 hours of recordings were produced, resulting in 69,371 transcribed words of text. An affordable software subscription package, Transcribe,7 was used. I listened to the recordings and dictated what I heard verbatim, using headphones and a microphone. The application’s speech-to-text function auto-transcribed as I spoke with few errors, which I was able to correct as I went along. Once the initial transcript document was ready, I read the text and arranged it with initials and colour-coding to show who was speaking.

This provided me with an excellent opportunity to immerse myself in the raw data. Mindful that occasional errors might occur, I monitored for these, which meant I was paying close attention to the detail of both the recording and the transcript, at the same time referring to my handwritten interview notes (examples are shown in Appendix 9, Figure 39, Figure 40). This led me at times to stop and make additional reflective notes or write myself reminders to cross-reference with previous transcripts or the literature, or to ask follow-up questions. Auto-transcription would have saved time but lacked such potential. Furthermore, auto-transcription conducted online might not meet my own or the University’s ethical standards or indeed conform with GDPR. Using an offline software package ensured the security of my data.

Each transcript was then shared with the participant family as described in Section 3.2.1 (p.73). Once revisions had been made, data contained in the transcript were

---

7 https://transcribe.wreally.com
re-ordered chronologically to create the participant family’s case study. This again was shared with the family, at which point further revisions or additions were made according to the participants’ wishes. Participants were not included in the eventual synthesis of the cases into this report. Notwithstanding the contention of Birt et al. (2016) that such final checking constitutes true ‘enhanced member checking’, I was mindful of the time participants had already shared, and the time that had passed since the interviews had taken place. My study’s design had intended convenience for participants, which could not reasonably extend to repeated contact from a researcher requesting draft checking many months later. Furthermore, Varpio et al. (2017) warn that such late-stage inclusion of participants can limit the research process. Conscious of these competing concerns and my own epistemic reflexivity, I have been guided by my ethical principles though the selection, analysis and presentation of cases.

3.6.1 Follow-up interviews

Two families participated in the study at different points in time, and so their accounts developed over the course of the research. One family was interviewed face-to-face shortly after beginning home education then, 20 months later, revisited online due to lockdown and the impossibility of the previously planned face-to-face follow up originally planned with a 12-month gap. A second participant initially responded to the survey, again, soon after commencing home education and was interviewed online 18 months later. I had not intended or expected to match the family in this way, ethically, and because survey data had been automatically anonymised. However, certain parts of the account were detailed very clearly in both participation methods. I had been working on survey data analysis, and the correspondence was very evident. With the participant’s consent,
the data were merged to create a single account which has also undergone the participant-checking process.

3.6.2 The need for flexibility
Between planning and designing the research and the collection and analysis of data, events occurred that affected the wider home education community. In England and Wales, concerns related to establishing local authority registers that would record all home educated children (Allen-Kinross, 2019; Wightwick, 2018). This, and the Dispatches broadcast (Channel 4, 2019) previously discussed, had the effect noted in previous studies of home education of making the population harder to connect with as an outsider conducting research (Nelson, 2013; Morton, 2011).

Khazaal et al. (2014) acknowledge inherent self-selection in online survey participation, as has been noted in previous home education research (e.g., Kendall & Taylor, 2016). My survey’s participants may represent the most digitally confident members of the home educating population, those driven by stronger personal views or more negative experiences, and of course, those with easy access to the Internet. Notwithstanding the risk of self-selection bias, these views are important for my study to gain a deeper understanding of families’ experiences; they also reflect reports seen in UK press (e.g., Hepburn, 2018).

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread across the UK, I applied to the University’s Ethics Committee (HREC) to move all research data collection online. This was approved; subsequently, in the following week a national lockdown was put in place and HREC issued guidance stating that no further face-to-face research interaction could take place.
A family who had intended to participate withdrew when one of the parents fell ill. The day out planned by another family was cancelled due to the first lockdown, so the follow-up was conducted electronically, in writing. At that stage, three in-depth interviews and two planned days out with families had taken place where four had been intended. A fourth family participated entirely online. These unavoidable changes prompted a decision to incorporate more of the unanticipated rich data from survey responses to open questions, to provide the five survey illustrations. These are presented in Chapter 4.

3.7 Analysis of the data

Bryman (2016) suggests that using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) has potential to add structure and transparency to the analysis of qualitative data. At various points during postgraduate study, the potential of using a software package such as NVivo to analyse data had been discussed in masters seminars, doctoral training, and I had attended online courses. I had imagined that using such a computer program might be convenient and, further, that it would add validity to the coding and analysis of my data. However, as I immersed myself in the data through interviewing, transcribing and then creating chronologically ordered accounts, I wondered how software could help me to better understand the data and their pertinence to my research question. For example, how might the deliberately open questions of my survey and related responses incorporating very varied vocabulary choices offered by the same or different participants to various questions impact software reliability?

My early analysis of the first 15 survey responses for my initial study had indicated that participants expressed themselves somewhat unpredictably when describing the circumstances leading them to begin home education, their school-based experiences and their home-based practices. This variability extended to the ways
in which they described their children, and their children’s experiences. Having worked manually with printouts, highlighters and sticky notes, and a combination of notebooks, tables and Excel spreadsheets for my pilot study, I rationalised that the time necessary to detect and input these variables for in-depth interviews and visits with seven families and the 93 survey responses might be better spent immersing myself in the data. Nevertheless, that wordcounts of both survey and transcription data revealed ‘school’ as the most frequent term, (Figure 4) seems to highlight the impact of the school experience on families. Adding every mention of ‘child/ren’, ‘son/s’, ‘daughter/s’ can balance the predominance of ‘school/s’, which seems unsurprising. However, though parents are primarily writing about their transition to home education and their developing and ongoing practices, the word ‘school’ appears in my survey data 864 times, compared with 246 for ‘home education’ and related terms such as ‘home educated’, combined.

Rubin and Rubin (2012, p.192) consider that qualitative analysis requires human evaluation to successfully note nuance, and to weigh up and achieve a deeper understanding and appreciation of responses ‘beyond mere counts.’ This was apparent as I read and re-read participant responses and interview transcriptions,
yet I often found it necessary to quantify items as I sought to make meaning of the
data. This is evident in Chapter 4 and Appendices 7 and 8, with an example of my
developing ‘counting’ presented in Appendix 10, showing discrepancies which
highlight the fact that my careful human evaluation did not always account for
unexpected word choices and spellings. Checking and re-checking of the data as
it was grouped and mapped continued as I refined and defined themes, illustrated
in Appendices 9 and 11.

My thesis applies the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, recently updated
analysis is a foundational method of qualitative analysis that can be used within
different theoretical frameworks. They suggest six phases of thematic analysis to
underpin a ‘deliberate and rigorous’ qualitative analytic method (Braun & Clarke,
2006, p.77, illustrated in Figure 5 below). This structure has been applied to guide
my analysis of the data and is compatible with the study’s epistemological position
that families construct meaning from their experiences. Notwithstanding my ethical
position with regard participant data, as the researcher, I have been responsible
for these determinations, and for developing and maintaining consistency. This
approach is also consistent with ‘Big Q’ reflexive thematic analysis, in that I, as
sole researcher, acknowledge my informed position as an inclusive educator
(Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.165).

Figure 5 Application of reflexive thematic analysis (based on Braun & Clark, 2006; 2021)
3.7.1 Survey

In phase 1, data familiarisation, I read the responses to my survey. Early responses were printed, annotated and colour coded as patterns, potential themes or ‘data sets’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79) were noted. In phase 2, the coding process begun with the survey data in phase 1 was continued and further developed. Although this was perhaps more time consuming than using a software package, because survey data were downloaded from Jisc in Excel format, finding, or more accurately, counting, terms representing the data sets, e.g., ‘bullying’, using the search function was nevertheless straightforward. This practice took me to the full response that had included the term searched for, which perhaps immersed me more quickly and fully in the data. Examples are shown in Appendices 9 and 10 (Figures 41, 42, Table 9).

Furthermore, while reading participant responses, at times, I came across terminology or misspelling that I would not have been likely to feed into data analysis software; these could have been missed had I chosen to automate the process. Where Excel did not include a function that I needed, I used a formula instead, for example, to count the number of words in a range of cells. This enabled me to quickly see which questions had elicited detailed responses, as well as noting which respondents had written at greater length, and simply knowing the overall wordcount. Word documents were also used, for example, to organise all responses to a particular question, or one participant’s responses. In the early stages, these documents were printed, and terms were colour coded. As well as Word files to group the data, notebooks were filled with handwritten response counts and coding. Theme generation began in phase 3 as I began to map codes to potential themes, and to group data accordingly. I developed diagrammatic
thematic maps that also helped me to further understand the participants’ data. Examples can be seen in Appendix 11 (Figure 43, Figure 44).

3.7.2 Fieldwork

Interviews were transcribed with some assistance from a software package as described in Chapter 3 (p.87). The program certainly aided with the transcription process; it also allowed me to become more familiar with and to develop my understanding of the data. At this stage, the learner concept maps were also compared with their interview transcripts, to check for missing or confusing information. Although, none was revealed, this task again afforded the opportunity to review and make sense of the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) stipulate the necessity of checking transcripts against the original audio or video for accuracy during phase 1. My study’s participant-checks, important both ethically and for accuracy, provided a further layer of scrutiny and validity. In phase 2, the participant-agreed interview transcripts and chronological case histories were reviewed and annotated, with sections of text colour-coded according to experiences reported. As mentioned, where documents had been printed, highlighters and post-it notes were useful at this coding stage. However, as more data were analysed, I became reluctant to use paper and ink, and began instead to use the highlighter and text colour functions in Office, and to write my thoughts as comments in the margins using the review function. Some examples of my developing strategies are shown in Appendices 9, 10 and 11 (from p.249).

Because both survey and interview data were gathered over the course of many months, the first three phases were applied to different data items as they were collected, or to growing data sets as they were collated. This added to the iterative, recursive and reflective nature of the process. At this stage, similarities were evident related to the circumstances that participants had found themselves
in, the processes they had undergone and the transitions they had undertaken as a result. These themes were checked, mapped, reviewed and defined through the fourth and fifth phases (Braun & Clarke, 2021; 2006). The final stages also included the reviewing and refining of the data sets that are presented in Chapter 4.

An important step in contextualising my data was through the development of concomitant and complementary theoretical frameworks. To understand their circumstances and the, often protracted, processes that families undertook or underwent, I applied Turner’s (1969) liminal theory, and extended his stages of social drama (1974). To explore the transitions of families within their home education practice, I combined this with Bronfenbrenner’s (1995a, 1995b) bioecological systems model. Importantly for me, ethically, this model places the child at the centre of any school- or home-based education, focusing on their individuality and agency. Although parent participation significantly outweighed that of children in my study, in this way, I endeavoured not to lose the focus on young people that I originally envisaged for my research.

3.8 Summary
The early planning stages of my study were informed by my previous contact with home educators and the recognition that, as a group, the home education population may have been marginalised over time, as discussed in Chapter 1. Guided by the warnings of Garcia and Ortiz (2013) not to contribute to this, albeit unintentionally, my original research design, from the consultation to develop the schedule of questions, to the distribution of the survey, was intended to be ethical, accessible and respectful. This extended to the data analysis and my development of a theoretical framework to consider the, sometimes, liminal status of participants as well as their individual agency. The understandable caution of home educators
towards a researcher who might be seen as a teacher is likely to have impacted recruitment for both the survey and case study participation. The spread of COVID-19 limited certain of the planned data gathering activities and participant recruitment. The online survey was closed before the first lockdown, when additional deeper case studies had been planned. Whilst this influenced the content of my thesis, fortunately, data gathered were sufficient.
4. Findings: online survey

4 (a) Survey responses

As indicated in Chapter 3, the survey was available from 4 February 2019. Over the course of the remaining calendar year, 96 families participated in total; three responses from the USA were not included due to my study’s UK focus.

4.1.1 Demographic data

The breakdown of reported responsibility within families for planning children’s home education is shown in Appendix 7 (Figure 31). In all, 68% (n=61) stated the children’s mother had full responsibility for home education, with a further 26% (n=23) specifying that mothers shared this responsibility. Indeed, participants’ descriptions of their communication with schools indicate that this was overwhelmingly a maternal experience and seems to reflect the, often, gendered nature of home education discussed in Chapter 2. Three fathers completed the questionnaire. One described being his children’s educator, one reported shared responsibility between parents, and one said the children’s mother took responsibility. Two mothers described their children’s father as the main home educator. It is interesting to consider whether these responses from parents who do not consider themselves the children’s main educator might reflect the impact of school difficulties on the whole family, or the extent to which home education becomes a family way of life, or both. One respondent was a young person currently learning at home with support from her mother.

Whereas government figures indicate the proportion of lone parent families in England is close to 13% for mothers, and almost 15% overall (ONS, 2019), 10% of respondents (n=9), all mothers, described themselves as single parents. Of these, just one reported sole charge of every aspect of home education. Four employed tutors for at least part of their children’s education, three additionally used online
tuition. Two mothers accessed predominantly online services and resources. One reported support from her own father, and one described her children as self-directed learners.

Eighty-seven participants completed the question related to ethnicity, 97% (n=84) described themselves as White. Responses are broken down and illustrated in Appendix 7 (Figure 32). The 2011 census recorded 87% of the UK population as White, suggesting this group may be over-represented as home educators in my study. It is important to acknowledge that some home educators may not engage with platforms where my survey was predominantly shared, including for cultural or religious reasons, or because they do not have equal access to the Internet. Given the acknowledged potential for home educators to be wary of researchers, and in light of negative experiences reported by Bhopal and Myers (2018), understandably some parents were cautious regarding survey participation. Ninety parents provided information related to their location as shown in Figure 6:

*Figure 6 Participant reported locations*

---

* NUTS UK map source: Piccolo Modificatore Laborioso at English Wikipedia / CC BY-SA [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)
The largest proportion of participants were based in the South East of England (29%, n=26), followed by Scotland (14%, n=13). No participants reported living in Northern Ireland, where home education is considered rare (Bower, 2019).

Reflecting the experience of S57, who ‘found out my friends that are teachers were not putting their own children into school,’ 18% of respondents (n=17) reported that at least one parent had worked in educational settings. Schoolteachers accounted for 13% (n=12), 2% (n=2) each had childcare qualifications or described themselves as tutors and 1% (n=1) worked in higher education. At times, parental profession seemed to emphasise the extent of children’s problems at school, for instance: ‘my husband is a teacher, so not a complaint we made lightly’ (S37); ‘the decision was hard and made harder because I am a teacher and was a governor at her school’ (S44).

Undertaking home education did not always prevent parents from working in education; 44% (n=8) said they were employed as teachers while their children were home educated. Two parents described older home educated children undertaking education studies and working in schools, as a ‘SEND’ specialist and senior school leader respectively. Responses indicated that these participants had not rejected school or formal education per se but felt that schools available to them had not been, or were no longer, the right settings for their children.

Eighty-four parents outlined their own education, illustrated in Appendix 7 (Figure 33). The proportion of graduates (69%, n=58) was higher than recorded in national statistics for England (DfE, 2019d) or than previously reported in a survey of home educators (Rothermel, 2002). The percentage of respondents with postgraduate qualifications exceeded double the national figures of 12.1% for England (ONS, 2018) at 32% (n=27), suggesting parents who have completed higher education
are perhaps more confident to undertake home education, or at least to participate in related research. This is not to say that parents without higher qualifications are less successful as home educators, as indicated by one parent who completed no formal education beyond school:

The suicidal 6-year-old child I described deregistering has just been given offers for all of the university places he applied for. He is intelligent, articulate, sociable, capable, well-adjusted and has much to offer the world. School would not have given us this outcome. Our family life was enriched in the most wonderful ways and I have gone on to home educate my younger children while running a business to pay our way as we do so. It's the best decision I ever made. (S54, 04/03/19)

Parental unhappiness at some stage of their own education is mentioned by 10% (n=9) of respondents. Additionally, one parent was entirely home educated, and another had completed GCSEs at home for health reasons. The impact of parents' own education on their motivation to undertake home education with their children is considered in Chapter 6.

Whereas Burke (2008) found that religion was the most common reason for parents to undertake home education, in my study, most participants reported no religious affiliation (54%, n=50) and some did not respond (18%, n=17). Christianity was the only 'major' religion reported (25%, n=23). Comparably with Rothermel's (2002) study, 3% of participants described themselves as Pagan (n=1) or Heathen (n=2). Two participants mentioned religion in the context of their children’s education: a Christian home educators' Facebook group (S52) and Quaker meeting (S74).

---

Unspecified Christian, 13; Church of England, 3; Church in Wales, 1; Orthodox Christian, 1; Roman Catholic, 2; Jehovah's Witness, 1; Quaker, 1; 'not practising', 1
4.1.2 Reported needs and diagnoses

Whilst the survey was not designed to generate lists of defined conditions or specific diagnoses, two-thirds of respondents (n=61) included this information. Because children’s needs and school-related difficulties underpinned the decisions of more than three-quarters of participants (n=73) to begin home education and informed their practice, these are reported in this section. Conditions and diagnoses have been itemised in Appendix 8 (Figure 36), where the incidence of reported co-occurring conditions is outlined. Such co-occurrence of neurodevelopmental conditions is ‘the rule rather than the exception’ (Dewey, 2018, p.238). It is sometimes referred to as ‘complex needs’, a term also used by participants (14%, n=8).

At school, some parents felt that certain teachers or school leaders did not recognise their children’s difficulties or seem equipped to support their children:

   Staff [...] didn't understand his diagnosis [...] said they couldn't support him [...] pressurised me to ‘do something’ without giving any indication as to what they wanted/needed, and I felt bullied myself. (S30, 08/02/19)

Reported tensions arising from apparent misunderstandings between schools and families related to perceived unmet needs are discussed at greater length in the next section outlining children's school experiences and parents’ relationships with schools (from p.103 in this section).

4.1.3 Education health and care plans and statements of SEN

Of the 80 participants based in England and Wales, 15 reported obtaining funding or support for their children via an EHC plan (England) or statement of SEN (Wales); a further six were applying. No respondents in Scotland mentioned a co-ordinated support plan (CSP). Participants’ reports related to the process and
impact of applying for statutory assessment of needs are included in the next section.

Co-occurrence of diagnosed conditions was reported by most who had secured a Statement or EHC plan (67%, n=10), shown in Appendix 8 (Figure 37). Six parents who secured EHC plans for their children had done so with the help of privately commissioned diagnostic reports, when schools or the local authority indicated that they were unable to fund initial assessments. Three had gone through the tribunal appeal process and two parents awaited the outcome two years after applying.

It is perhaps unsurprising that some parents do not pursue statutory assessment. For example, one parent described deciding to begin home education after her son’s headteacher revealed having ‘fought’ for six years to secure support for her own son through a statement of SEN, ‘I just felt if the family and my son were in such a mess after 3 months, I feared for us if we had a 6-year fight ahead of us’ (S86). She went on, ‘[s]o many are fighting for years to get the support needed whilst the children are suffering and getting further and further behind in school.’

4.1.4 Family structure and sibling education

Participants shared information relating to 62 sons, 51 daughters and 31 children whose gender was not specified, shown in Appendix 7 (Figure 34). This might suggest that boys are more likely than girls to be home educated, which contradicts the findings of Hopwood et al. (2007) that the gender distribution of home educated children was even. A slight predominance of boys removed from school due to their needs perceived as unmet may reflect government statistics showing boys account for over 73% of EHC plans issued and almost 65% of SEN support (DfE, 2020b). A relative gender balance is not representative of the
literature related to children’s unmet needs, for example, research by Cullen and Lindsay (2019) related to 64 boys and just 17 girls. Whilst girls are more likely now than in the past to receive a diagnosis of conditions such as autism, ADHD, DCD or dyslexia, there is still a male bias (Ferri et al., 2018).

Almost a third of parents who mentioned more than one child said other children in the family were educated at school (30%, n=16). Where other children were reported to be at school, these siblings had already started at school when their brother or sister began home education. Where an older child was described as beginning home education before younger siblings were enrolled at school, participants reported also undertaking home education with these younger children.

4.2 Circumstances, transitions and processes

Certain respondents reported that they had always intended to home educate (14%, n=13). One mother reported that her partner had been home educated, and this, along with her own unhappy experience of school had informed their decision to home educate. Seven parents had planned to send their children to school but were not successful securing places in settings they believed would be right for their children and so they began home education, for example, ‘my son was not offered a place in any of the local schools’ (S62). All 73 remaining participants enrolled at least one of their children at school initially.

4.2.1 Parents’ expectations of school

The survey was primarily designed to investigate family transitions to and within home education, to address my research question. Acknowledging that recollections necessarily reflect participants’ ontological perspectives, it is helpful to consider parental expectations and aspirations to appreciate reported
experiences. These were captured by the opening question: *What did you anticipate about your child/children’s education before they reached school age?*

Most participants who had planned school attendance described initial hopes for their children’s education (95%, n=76). Two respondents originally hoped to home educate but enrolled their children at schools due to family circumstances. One intended to enrol at transition to Key Stage 2 but continued home educating instead. Two had expectations related to high academic potential. Three selected schools specifically to meet children’s already identified needs. Eight had plotted progression through primary and secondary schools, moving into a ‘catchment area’. Seven felt no local schools were ‘right’ for their child.

The majority of responses (70%, n=53) related to three main parental expectations:

1. **children would remain in school, perhaps progressing to college or university** (22%, n=17): S85 ‘assumed they would go down the same route as me and go to school and then maybe uni.’

2. **children would be included and supported, should needs be identified** (22%, n=17): S64 believed ‘they would be supported as an individual throughout the mainstream education that we thought he was entitled to. That we could work with the school as a team to iron out any difficulties together.’

3. **school would foster a ‘love of learning’**\(^{10}\) in children (25%, n=19): S22 hoped ‘education would put wings on her back. She would fly. She was so capable and curious about life; it would open the door wider and teach her how to be in this world with the tools she needed.’

Participant responses to the second survey question *What circumstances led you to home educate? Please describe the decision-making process?* seem to document changing family perspectives. Parents shift from an initial expectation of what schools can or should do to a position of disappointment, coloured perhaps

---

\(^{10}\) Exact wording used by S1, 05/02/2019; S59, 04/03/2019; S73, 18/03/2019; S77, 24/03/2019; S81, 13/06/2019
by those initial expectations. An example of this can be seen in the words of one respondent whose son began school with a known disability:

Question 1: I believed he would go through mainstream schooling system as far as his academic ability allowed despite already having diagnosis of bilateral hearing loss and suspected autism.

Question 2: Three horrendous years in school of unmet SEN led me to home educate [...] I had heard of home education, had researched it. When current school informed LA they could meet his needs and that was a done deal as far as the LA were concerned, I decided to home educate as it had to be better than the three damaging years we had already done. (S73, 18/03/19)

Further examples of such ‘emergency’ parental responses to perceived school failures can be seen in the section related to parents’ relationships with schools (4.2.3, p.108). This tension between parental expectations, based, perhaps, on an interpretation of legislation and statutory frameworks, and their later view of what schools provided for their children is further discussed in Chapter 6.

4.2.2 Children’s reported school experiences

Participants described children’s ongoing distress (44%, n=32), and deteriorating mental health (33%, n=24) informing their decision to begin home education, for example: ‘my child was headed for a breakdown if we forced her to attend school’ (S3). With children still at school, parents talk of witnessing their mental and at times physical deterioration. One parent explained ‘all of his symptoms became worse the more school he attended’ (S32). This reportedly had the potential to impact on the entire family:

Watching her have anxiety attacks several times per week, having our entire life dominated by her fear and her childhood being robbed by constant terror about going into school. (S21, 6/02/19)

Teachers are expected to ‘have a secure understanding of how a range of factors can inhibit pupils’ ability to learn, and how best to overcome these’ (DfE, 2011,
At times, my data seem to suggest a disconnection between parents’ understanding of teachers’ roles and responsibilities, or between teachers’ and parents’ understanding of the children, or both. Such responses are typified by one parent, a teacher whose son had received a diagnosis of autism since being withdrawn from school aged eight:

None of this was picked up at school, instead he was criticised for his mindset or not paying attention, which led to his mental breakdown. (S92, 18/12/19)

Done and Murphy (2018) agree with Scotcher and Boden (2018) that it is unreasonable to expect classroom teachers to identify children and provide mental health support. S32 reflected, ‘it is very disappointing, but also very realistic to reach the conclusion that our mainstream schools struggle to support good mental health.’ Whilst it is important to acknowledge that past events can be misremembered (Levine et al., 2009), six parents gave accounts of children’s suicidal behaviour whilst enrolled at school, all of whom reported significant improvement since deregistration.

Parents described difficulties transitioning to or between schools or sparked by a change of class or teacher (27%, n=20). Such instances can be seen in the survey illustrations from p.131 and echo the findings of Galton et al. (2003). Ongoing difficulties at primary school prompted eight participants to begin home education rather than risk transfer to secondary school, where one parent reported, ‘at secondary he was not able to cope with the environment emotionally and this was affecting him greatly, leading to failure academically’ (S42).

Parents said bullying drove to deregistration (26%, n=21). Most who reported bullying (81%, n=17) listed at least one diagnosed need, as shown in Appendix 8 (Figure 38). Studies have shown that children with developmental conditions experience bullying more often than their ‘typically developing’ peers (e.g., Karras
et al., 2019; Hebron et al., 2017). Anxiety often co-occurs with neurodevelopmental conditions (Dewey, 2018); children with anxiety were the biggest group reported as victims of bullying. Participants ascribed children’s anxiety to undiagnosed and/or unsupported learning needs at school, for example:

My son was having increasing difficulties in Year 7, including bullying, school not meeting his individual needs, and refusing to accept that he had any. [This] led to anxiety, stammering, selective mutism, twitching and inability to do schoolwork. (S64, 06/03/2019)

Bullying sometimes began or worsened following a transition, particularly to a senior school. Parents considered that bullying was not handled satisfactorily, or was ignored, or even perpetrated by teachers. S60 stated, ‘he had a teacher who was bullying him […] He was at breaking point emotionally, mentally and academically.’

It was not always easy to ‘unpick’ where children’s unhappiness might end and their learning difficulties begin, for example, S82 who had herself remained happily in education until completing a doctorate, was first bemused, then distressed by her daughter’s experience. Her daughter was considered ‘emotional’ and called a ‘drama queen’ at school. Eventually, ‘she started to develop severe anxiety about social situations in general and school in particular.’

A parent whose daughter had received a diagnosis of autism aged five deregistered her, aged ten, after:

The educational psychologist who had been asked to support her with her emotional distress instead called her 'strange' and told the teacher just to leave her out of things and she would soon join in. (S3, 05/02/19)

Such practice from professionals seems unconscionable even without the links acknowledged between children’s emotions and their academic performance (Rucinski et al., 2018).
4.2.3 Parents’ relationships with schools

Parents expressed frustration that some teachers appeared to deny or misunderstand their children’s support needs (73%, n=53). Each family with experience of school provided their view of how children’s needs were unsupported, and they detailed the circumstances leading them to begin home education. This is typified by the account of S26 who felt her concerns were dismissed by school, ‘[who] failed to understand his needs despite a diagnosis’. Children’s ‘undesirable’ classroom behaviour was reportedly punished when support might have avoided the situation altogether, for example:

[...his] needs [were] not met, [leading to an] increase in anxiety which led to behaviour difficulties and extremely low self-esteem. School [was] far more concerned about the behaviours rather than the cause. (S2, 05/02/19)

Figure 7 shows the range of reported experiences leading these families to home educate:

Respondents noted tensions or even breakdowns in their communication with teachers (29% n=21). Some parents described being advised of their child’s difficulties in school for the first time at a parents’ consultation meeting, for example, S15 stated, ‘after 2 terms in reception I was told not to expect anything from my eldest’. The parent, an academic in the field of health, goes on to explain that teachers ‘were adamant that they could ‘look after’ her and to leave it to them.’ These and other similar reported interactions with teachers seem shocking, and
the accuracy of such recollections might be questioned by many working in education.

Certainly, both as a teacher and a parent, I have been aware of times when I felt my words had been misremembered or taken out of context. Petrie (1992) posited that such misunderstandings between parents and school constituted conflict, and that this might account for the decision of parents to home educate. It should also be acknowledged that parents’ retrospective constructions of their school relationships may, at times, seek to justify their decision to home educate.

Other parents described ‘repeated discussions with school, but nothing changed’ (S33) or the frustration of ‘years of meetings’ (S28). It is interesting to consider that such conflict with schools (15 parents in Figure 7) might sometimes be the result of miscommunication, as described in the literature (e.g., Bilton et al., 2018; MacLure and Walker, 2000). From my survey’s data, it would seem that schools and teachers can miss opportunities to develop their relationships with parents and learn more about the individual children they teach.

The majority of survey participants represented above in Figure 7 reported both inadequate support from schools and that their concerns were misunderstood or denied. In outlining their school relationships, 49 of these respondents described at least one additional negative experience from those listed, with two or three additional experiences outlined by 26 parents. This is shown in Appendix 7 (Figure 35).

From this, it is perhaps reasonable to suppose that a series or confluence of negative experiences led these families to begin home education. The majority of survey participants represented above reported both inadequate support from schools and that their concerns were misunderstood or denied. Whereas schools
reportedly seemed to focus on measurable results, as discussed in Chapter 2, parent responses prioritised feeling listened to, understood, and participating in successful, followed-up meetings, when they consider their children’s education.

Parents described their views, and their children’s, diverging from those of individual teachers and other professionals, as in the case of S31 ‘telling me that [my child] was fine when she wasn’t.’ Parallels can perhaps be drawn with the differing perceptions voiced decades ago by teachers, parents and students during parent consultation meetings described by MacLure and Walker (2000). Such conflict, resulting in or from failed meetings (29%, n=21) and/or parental concerns being ignored by schools (33%, n=24), led to irreconcilable differences for participants who deregistered their children to begin home education. This is illustrated in Appendix 7 (Figure 35). Several participants report feeling side-lined into passive or supportive roles, as can be seen in the case illustrations from p.131.

Notwithstanding that professionals’ chosen words can create or avoid a barrier for parents (MacLure & Walker, 2000), participants occasionally employed technical and potentially pathologising language used in educational and other settings as described by Weaver (2020). This is evident in respondents’ detailing of their children’s unmet needs, for instance:

Our son has ASD with demand avoidance, SPD\(^{11}\), poor working memory and we are awaiting a private diagnosis for ADD\(^{12}\) (S92)

This adoption of specialist terms and acronyms seems to mirror the observations of Shepherd et al. (2017) and MacLure and Walker (2000, p.15), who found parents became ‘articulate challengers’ having been ‘forced in the past to engage

\(^{11}\) Sensory Processing Disorder
\(^{12}\) ADHD (predominantly inattentive presentation) is sometimes called ADD, which is not an official diagnostic term.
with the procedures and terminology’ as their children’s advocates. Responses include confident use of educational jargon, for example, ‘direct instruction’ (S2), ‘evidence-based practice’ (S11); ‘accessible curriculum’ (S23); ‘reasonable adjustments’ (S31); ‘SPAG’ (S33); ‘transition’ (S40); ‘individualise education’ (S64); ‘suitable educational provision […] mainstream environment’ (S83). This knowledge and confidence led some parents go on to run local or national home education groups and networks, or to retrain, for example one parent undertaking MSc studies in mental health and social inclusion explained, ‘I have […] done the IPSEA training’ (S21).

4.2.4 Families’ decision-making processes

Parents detailed a sometimes dawning, or possibly abrupt, realisation that the school environment was not ‘right’ for their child. Describing her adopted son’s early trauma, one mother recognised that ‘school could not provide the type of environment he needed to thrive’ (S38). Another parent chronicled her child’s deteriorating health, culminating in stopping eating, concluding, ‘I honestly believe [this happened] because the school was not the right environment’ (S93). Occasionally, schools conceded that the setting was not appropriate:

    Circumstances led us to the conclusion that school was not a safe place for her either physically or emotionally – she hurt herself very badly in her distress and we took her out of school with full agreement of school! (S59, 04/03/19)

In some cases, the decision to begin home education may have surprised schools, such as when one parent was contacted by a class teacher chasing the permission slip for a school trip the week after she had deregistered her son. However, the families’ perspective was of ongoing difficulties lasting terms or

---

13 Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (IPSEA) runs training in special educational needs and disability (SEND) law [https://www.ipsea.org.uk/Pages/FAQs/Category/parent-and-carer-online-training](https://www.ipsea.org.uk/Pages/FAQs/Category/parent-and-carer-online-training)
occasionally several school years. For example, in the face of longstanding school anxiety, following publication of a poor Ofsted report S46 declared: ‘my decision was made.’

Participants also reported on the processes leading up to, surrounding and following their commencement of home education, including their perception of relationships with some teachers, schools and/or local authorities as ‘battles’ (S6). For some, home education seemed to offer respite from the efforts to secure specialist support or placement. One parent described their child’s first three years at school in the context of a ‘fight’ for what she saw as the right to an inclusive education for her son:

Fighting to get any recognition, support. Fighting for EHCP. Fighting for assessments and the whole time watching him fall apart before my eyes and the family suffering. (S73, 18/03/19)

She explained that her son’s community paediatrician asked school to arrange an educational psychologist assessment, which did not happen. This was possibly due to a school or local authority budget issue or local service shortages as discussed by Lyonette et al. (2019), or to the school’s different perspectives on the boy’s needs. Eventually, the family commissioned an educational psychologist privately, and the school used the resulting report to apply for an EHC plan. The child’s teacher agreed he would be best supported in a specialist setting; however, the local authority specified in their draft EHC plan that he should remain in the current school. S73 explained: ‘we decided to home educate from that point.’

Contrastingly, having secured an EHC plan for her son based on his existing placement, S11 was told by his school that ‘they couldn’t meet his needs.’ Other parents found they could not sustain the ‘fight’ and resorted to home education more quickly:
We made [the] decision after several months of fighting the authority for our middle child to attend specialist school, that it was not in his interest to continue due to a rapid deterioration in his health and the impact it was having on the family. (S83, 11/06/19)

One parent encapsulated the commonly reported feeling of being outside or against the school system: ‘basically if your child has difficulties in school you are, for the most part, on your own or you have to fight for years for help’ (S92).

Parents described their efforts to secure assessment and diagnosis in fighting terms, too, ‘it wasn't until aged 7 (and a lot of pressure/fighting from me […] that he was diagnosed’ (S47). Parents of children with EHC plans recounted their ongoing campaigns to obtain support, whether at home ‘we’re fighting through the tribunal process to get the support to which he is legally entitled’ (S40); or through the allocation of a place in a specialist setting: ‘I think we will be fighting the LA tooth and nail for the rest of her statutory school life’ (S21).

4.2.5 Considering and transitioning to home education

Of the 73 families initially enrolling at least one child in school, 12% (n=9) expressed strong views that their undertaking of home education was involuntary, echoing press reports (e.g., Weale, 2019), for example: ‘I have had no choice but to home educate’ (S7); ‘we were left with no other choice’ (S64). Official terminology around UK home education ‘Elective Home Education’ exacerbated parents’ sense of frustration. For example, ‘there is nothing elective [about] our home education’ (S23); ‘this is NOT elective home education’ (S41); ‘this was not elective’ (S58). S21 explained that her daughter remains on the school roll, as they continue to seek a suitable placement: ‘I refused to de-register her as I was not going to be forced into ‘elective’ home education.’ Reports of parents who are pressured into deregistering their children seem widespread (e.g., Epstein et al.,
The issue of whether dropping or replacing the word 'elective' from the term might change parents' impressions of their experiences is thought-provoking.

For others, the decision to deregister from school and begin home education might at times appear sudden to schools. However, some parents described extended periods ‘3-4 months’ (S53) spent investigating before beginning home education: ‘hours and weeks researching online’ (S17), ‘detailed consideration and research’ (S50). Several families described first starting home education on a trial basis, before committing to the practice long-term: ‘we agreed to give it a go, just for the year’ (S44), ‘we tried […] for the summer holidays’ (S84). A few parents reported that their children first proposed home education: ‘My daughter brought the idea of home schooling to me […] I knew something had to change so I agreed to trial it’ (S33).

Nineteen participants (20%) referred directly to the support of family and friends in their home education endeavours; however, others describe less favourable responses from both close relatives and the wider community. ‘Disapproval’ (S37), ‘discrimination and suspicion’ (S80) led to ‘friction’ (S74) and feelings of ostracisation. Whereas Daniels (2017) reported no resistance from schools when families began home educating, some parents in my survey recounted instances of school or local authority staff erroneously suggesting that family plans for home education were not legal. Others were told that they would be subject to inspections, for example: ‘his head teacher […] tried to persuade me not to and […] used threats of OFSTED inspections’ (S73). Echoing discussions in the literature (Section 2.3, p.47), respondents told of veiled or open threats to report them to social services; for more than one family, this became all too real: ‘head teacher reported me to social services’ (S28); ‘we were investigated by SS at the hands of
the head as instructed by the LADO’14 (S49). Such processes sometimes happened while children were still at school and for some families may have precipitated deregistration:

[T]he school completely dismissed [my concerns,] accus[ed] me of being an oversensitive mother and called in the family link workers to assess my parenting. (S72, 18/03/2019).

As well as social and family impacts, parents described changes to their working lives and earning potential, with working hours reduced, jobs lost, or businesses closed. Participants expressed their frustration at the media portrayal of home educators, for example, S26 suggested something that would make home education easier would be ‘the media laying off with their propaganda’. Perhaps in future some of these perceptions and media reporting may change following the wider population’s experience of balancing work from home with managing their children’s learning during the 2020-21 lockdowns, though it is too soon to speculate whether such a change might be lasting.

As discussed in the next section, participants reported that help from family and friends enhanced home education for them or made it possible at all (21%, n=19). For many still considering or just starting out, experienced home educators and organised groups provided a much-needed lifeline through ‘help, support and advice’ (S55). Parents described how the support of such groups has helped them to establish their own routines and practices, for example:

We joined a local network, […] learned more about various educational approaches, […] and were exposed to multi age children and adults from different […] backgrounds. We adapted, changed, explored other ideas, took advantage of opportunities to visit museums and take part in workshops and clubs. (S5, 5/02/19)

14 Local Authority Designated Officer responsible for managing child protection allegations
Parents said that joining one group of home educators might snowball into new networks and finding out about the local and wider community, others described developing their own networks over time, combining the resources of local and nationwide home educators, family, friends and the not-for-profit sector, with three participants reporting that they helped run local or national groups.

Participants discussed children’s rights to education and the responsibilities of schools or local authorities (27%, n=25). At times, legality was invoked almost as a protective shield, for example: ‘entitled to in law’ (S55); ‘her legal rights’ (S21); ‘I am responsible legally for his education’ (S26); ‘legally entitled’ (S40); ‘it’s a legal choice’ (S54). Established home educators ensured that newly at home parents knew ‘there is a legal obligation to educate your child but not a legal obligation to send them to school’ (S66). Perceived systemic failures were described in the same terms: ‘acting ultra vires as so many local authorities do’ (S62), ‘a hidden problem [...that] contravenes the basic right for every child to receive an adequate education’ (S91). An example of new home educators drawing strength from this sharing of legal knowledge can be seen in the survey illustrations from p.131.

In response to Q.6 ‘What information and/or support does your local authority provide?’ the most common response was ‘none’ (34%, n=32), or in one case: ‘😂😂 None!’ (S89). Some participants were unaware of any help available, or said, for example ‘very little!’ (S22) (10%, n=9). Overall, few participants stated that their local authority was actively anti-home education (4%, n=4). Some considered that they were able to access useful information and support for home education from their local authority (11%, n=10), others reported that they had received a letter or leaflet or been directed to a basic webpage (16%, n=15), or said that the local authority employed someone to act as an advisor to home educators (14%, n=13). One parent had arranged for her son to receive local
authority support for home education through his EHC plan specifying ‘education other than at school’ (EOTAS).

Participants chronicled the transition from school parents to home educators, outlining their own uncertainty and development, at times echoing the disapproval they reported from school, family and the wider community. One parent described following the official steps to secure specialist support for her child, but finding the family’s three-year campaign thwarted and seeing no option but to home educate:

We got the EHCP. We wanted a specialist school, but his mainstream said they could meet his needs. Therefore, the LA refused special provision. By this time, he was barely sleeping, eating or drinking he was so overwhelmed and anxious. We simply couldn't do any more schooling. (S26, 6/02/19)

S1 recounted ‘terrible, traumatic experiences’ as her child was repeatedly excluded and ‘just [...] left with us’ with no clear communication from school or the local authority. Her need to be at home with her child led to losing her job and having to apply for benefits. Although for some, beginning home education is reported as ‘a huge relief’ (S17), for others, the change was said to have a ‘huge detrimental effect on the family’ (S6), perhaps because home education felt imposed. One parent expressed deep concern about what was expected of her:

I am on the brink of burnout constantly as I have little support from anyone, I constantly worry that I should be sending the kids to school which is stressful. I am unable to work, which also adds to financial pressure. (S7, 5/2/19)

Another shared her anger and frustration at the disapproval she experienced in the early days of home educating:

I find it very difficult that so many people have a negative opinion of our decision and freely tell us so. Our families haven’t been supportive, and a neighbour voiced her strong opinion in the street, in front of our daughter and made me feel like a terrible parent. People on buses and in shops
frequently ask our daughter why she isn’t in school and I feel apologetic and frequently mumble something non-committal. (S71, 14/3/19)

Perhaps such perceived censure reflects the relative mystery that shrouds home education from the general public as discussed by Lees (2010). If, as Bhopal and Myers (2018) suggest, a historic sense pervades in the UK of a national duty for children to attend school, both censure and mystery might stem from this. It is, arguably, unsurprising that so many of these parents feel both displaced from the educational system and outside societal norms, as voiced by one father:

We need the government to clearly dispel the notion that HE in itself is a cause for concern, either in terms of education or safeguarding (or 'radicalisation'). The current atmosphere, fuelled in part by the government and in part by the Children’s Commissioner, creates a hostile atmosphere likely to drive HE families away from other services. (S79, 24/03/19)

Most participants reported no intention of returning to school as shown in Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trialling or returning to school</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No intention</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more (failed) attempts</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspire to try in future</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful return under 16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/FE college at 15+ for GCSEs/A levels</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses reflected the loss of trust and resulting complication of wider relationships described by Bormann and John (2014), for example, ‘I have no faith that schools can help me’ (S9), ‘I think most home educators feel that the LA is against home education and don’t actually trust them at all’ (S20), ‘It's an easy fix for LAs to push ASN families into home education’ (S91). If, as Morgner (2018) suggests, without trust, individuals are unlikely to maintain relationships with organisations or systems, then my study’s participants reportedly difficult
relationships with school and the education system are perhaps unsurprising. From such a low point, one might question how any parents became confident home educators, with all that this entails; however, they reportedly did, and some described roles leading local and national home education groups, or aspirations such as those of S22, ‘maybe we will set up our own school!’ In the following section, there is some evidence that parents, at times, seem to replicate an idealised view of schools in their home education practice.

4.2.6 Home education processes and practices

Beginning home education with one child sometimes led to others in the family deregistering or never enrolling. For example, ‘her elder sister after a year could see what an amazing time she was having, and I was persuaded to educate her too’ (S44). Another recounts: ‘I saw how HE helped my daughter and tired of the daily battles with my son took him out three months after my daughter. I haven’t regretted it for a second’ (S33).

Children in one family did not always follow the same pattern of school and home education, as illustrated in Appendix 7 (Figure 34). For example, S21 explained: ‘as my eldest had sailed through every educational setting […], I assumed my youngest would more or less follow suit.’ It is not always younger siblings who find school overwhelming, for example: ‘our second child attends school, […] the environment suits him’ (S3). Parents describe logistical issues with balancing time between work and their school- and home educated children: ‘I juggle my time […my] husband can be flexible with his work’ (S12).

As previously noted, parents often reported researching long before beginning home education; however, this was not always possible, for example, when home education began as the result of school exclusion. One parent, a teacher who had
to give up full-time work, explained: ‘it was forced upon us with no time to really research’ (S4). A range of practices are described after children stop attending school. The term ‘deschooling’, coined by Illich (1971) has been used by home educators globally to describe a period of adjustment after leaving school, as children and parents prepare for home education (Danza, 2020). Some participants described taking the summer or another holiday period to adapt; others found it took longer to prepare children for learning experiences they equated with school. One parent reported that her son ‘spent 6 months taking time to heal’ (S30). A small number of families began home educating immediately, for example: ‘we deregistered on the Friday and began HE on the following Monday’ (S37).

Ninety-two parents outlined their involvement with local and national networks; 29% (n=27) described this in the context of a ‘community’:

They made lots of friends and we became part of the Home Education community (S76, 18/03/19)

Families engaged with national home educators’ groups, charities, camps and other annual events, or charities and groups dedicated to families of children with additional needs. Over half reported accessing one or more local home education groups; these were described as both learning and social opportunities. This is broken down below in Figure 8.

Whilst such networks were considered vital to many, some reported that groups in their area were hard to access or not appropriate for their children’s ages (8%, n=7). One long-time home educator described travelling for an hour to meet up with like-minded home educators (S95). In fact, 30 of the participants who reported accessing online resources did not describe face-to-face contact with other home educators. Whilst it should not be assumed from this that there was no group
contact, it is perhaps reasonable to consider that such groups were not yet part of these families’ regular home education activities. Given the limited opportunities for in-person contact during the 2020-21 lockdowns, it is possible that some families whose early support networks have been developed and consolidated online over an enforced extended period may transition to face-to-face participation at a different pace or in different ways than has been described by participants in my research.

Figure 8 Parent reported supportive networks

The six respondents who detailed participation in SEND/ALD groups did so online. Five of these families also reported participation in local groups. Only two of the six described using online resources to support their children’s learning. Parents of five children reported that organised groups are difficult for them after the chronicled school-based trauma, for example: ‘at the moment [we meet…] other friends who home educate as my son doesn't cope in groups’ (S64); ‘we are working up to attending HE groups as her anxiety becomes more manageable’ (S81). It might be speculated that such children may have found large groups at school uncomfortable or challenging. Anxiety may also have impacted some children’s ability to engage with online learning, with just two of the six families reporting this practice.
Since the survey was shared in social media groups, it is perhaps unsurprising that many parents reported using social networks (66%, n=61). Participants accessed Facebook groups to find local and national home education event listings, for discounted print and electronic educational resources and as a main source of support, resources and information on home education-and additional needs-related matters. Beyond the suggestions of Nowak (2008) that online forums might offer parents empowerment through knowledge, it is conceivable that sympathy and assistance offered in relatively anonymous online spaces seems more accessible to some parents given the reported lack of family or neighbourly support and discussed above. S70 explained, ‘I've never messaged anybody in the group, but I sometimes find the information helpful.’ Whether online or face-to-face, participants valued the input offered by others who had shared similar experiences, for example, S74 summed up, ‘support from other parents is very important.’ This echo by parents outside the formal education system of collaborative professional development by teachers in schools is perhaps just one example of parallel practice.

*Figure 9 Reported group participation and access to online learning*

As seen above in Figure 9, 70 parents reported local or social media groups and forums as sources of support. This ranged from activity listings and discounts to outings and wider advice. Perhaps as well as the Internet democratising access to
knowledge, the immediate availability of information online has accelerated families’ uptake of home education as noted in Chapters 1 and 2. Nine parents detailed their use of online resources with no reference to such support. The overlap between physical and virtual groups and learning opportunities accessed by families hints at a mutually enriching hybrid environment.

Online apps, websites and educational programs were used regularly, with some using online classes or tutorials for some or all of their children’s planned learning. In some ways, this more formal, structured practice might seem to replicate an idealised view of school. Reported resources, practices and activities related to home education are outlined below, in Figure 10. To some extent, reflect the spread of materials used and activities undertaken by schools, perhaps differently proportioned.

*Figure 10 Home education activities, practices and resources*

Parents included time spent outside, such as nature walks and farm visits, in their learning experiences. They valued local after-school or weekend activities, including, for example, brownies, scouts, sports clubs and team or individual competitions. Participants listed their local library as a venue, a resource base, or both. The educational value was discussed of visits to museums, stately homes and other historical sites, whether as a family or in groups organised by or for home educators.
Participants with children across the age ranges reported their view and use of practical tasks as learning experiences, including daily chores, shopping, cooking, DIY and repair tasks, for example:

   Learning is an ongoing process and a mindset. We try and use life as a learning opportunity, for example baking or gardening. (S7, 05/02/19)

Parents regarded these in terms of reading, writing, oracy and maths as well as practical life skills and benefits related to self-confidence. For instance, one parent planned opportunities for her autistic daughter to develop skills for independent living:

   […] to catch buses and trains, read timetables, speak to other people, manage money, order food, ask for assistance, navigate busy areas […]
   (S21, 06/02/20)

Seven older children were reported to have become youth leaders and coaches in their clubs and teams, volunteering or involved in charity work.

In common with previous studies (e.g., Morton, 2010), some parents described beginning home education with some of the formality of the school day. For a small number, this continued, for instance, three flexi-schoolers and S2’s daughter, who enrolled at an online school at the start of her home-based education.

Just over half of participants outlined a day structured around planned academic lessons and activities, with more than a quarter of parents determining what children should learn and when, as generally happens at school. Reflecting common primary school practice, parents often described focusing on more formal learning in the mornings, followed by practical tasks, chosen activities or outings in the afternoons. Close to half of participants told of more informal learning activities, with six parents setting out entirely unstructured, opportunistic learning as shown in Figure 11:
Reflecting the findings of Thomas and Pattison (2007), almost two-thirds of parents described their family’s home education as being driven by the children’s own interests, using terms such as ‘tailor’ and ‘child-led’. Within this group, a wide variety of practices was reported: parents supporting their children to learn entirely independently and practically; finding local events and activities; employing local experts as tutors and facilitators; buying in or exchanging expertise co-operatively with other home educators; accessing free or paid resources or tuition online.

Families did not always use the same method, often choosing different styles or combinations of teaching, learning or resources according to availability or affordability or to suit different topics or children. Whilst this type of flexibility should perhaps be possible in classrooms, it may not easily lend itself to whole class teaching or every subject (Thomas, 1998).

Three parents described successful flexi-schooling; a fourth placement had failed (S54). One child had been allowed to flexi-school for two years while his mother volunteered at the setting, but he had been unable to manage the transition to secondary school full-time. One family had arranged flexi-schooling to accommodate their son’s exhaustion caused by chronic illness after this was recommended by his paediatrician. One father explained he and his wife, both
teachers, had worked part-time and shared home education responsibilities. Their small local primary school had been happy to accommodate this arrangement for the eldest child. Subsequently, the older children attended school full-time from Year 6, progressing through school to university. The youngest child continued to flexi-school through his secondary years, supported through an EHC plan due to a health condition. Some participants (15%, n=14) stated that they would have welcomed the opportunity for their children to flexi-school but had been unable to negotiate this. As mentioned in Chapter 2, it appears more difficult to put flexi-schooling arrangements in place since school attendance was adopted by Ofsted as a measure of school performance and pupil wellbeing (Coleman, 2009).

Of the 56 parents in Figure 11 describing their home education as child-led, four reported that their children took the lead in planning activities, including two families where the children were said to be entirely autonomous learners. Autonomy in learning may seem best suited to home education and perhaps even at odds with the necessary structure of school-based education. Though the UK focus has tended towards a ‘knowledge-based’ curriculum since the introduction of the National Curriculum (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019, p.234), the concept of children’s agency and autonomy in their learning has, been promoted in British schools in the past, not least through the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967).

In the context of home education, autonomous learning might most resemble the ‘unschooling’ approach, which is often portrayed in the media as children following their own interests, or none, with minimal parental involvement or supervision (Parkes, 2016). Descriptions of unschooling by parents in my study range from a period of ‘decompression’ where no formal learning was planned immediately following deregistration, to descriptions from the parents of self-directed teenage learners, for example:
They [...] direct their own study. This can range from the Japanese my daughter has started to self-teach, her photography, some maths [...] discussions with their friends on a broad range of topics [...] We go out together still and they go to teen clubs where they participate and volunteer to support younger children. (S25, 06/02/19)

It is interesting to consider the extent to which parental outlook and facilitation in the past has led this philosophy, and whether participants still at the early stage of home education may, in the future, develop their practice in the same way.

4.2.7 Evolving circumstances and resulting practices

The reality some parents set out was at times hard to read: single parents described their extreme discomfort having to apply for benefits, others talked of ‘burnout’, ‘financial pressure’, feeling ‘completely trapped’ (S7); of ‘rarely see[ing] friends’, that ‘it’s not an easy choice’ (S17); of finding home education ‘extremely exhausting’ with ‘no respite or support’ (S24); of ‘giv[ing] up work due to stress,’ and being ‘on the verge of bankruptcy’ (S42).

Things were not necessarily easy for two-parent families:

I haven’t been able to work full-time for 5 years, and I now have to fit any work into evenings or weekends unless I can get my husband or family to take a day off […] it is very difficult for me to have even a few hours to myself. (S21, 06/02/19)

These changes to family circumstances as described above were often seen in terms of financial and emotional erosion or loss. Feelings of loss are also expressed for the childhood and schooling some had pictured for their children, for example: ‘initially as parents it was very stressful, we mourned the future we thought we had expected for him’ (S35).

Fifteen parents wrote about reactions to home education from their families; just two said that their own parents had been supportive at the outset. Despite initial
misgivings, most extended families reportedly changed their minds, as in this example:

Some [...] objected until they saw the state of my daughter. They then saw how she flourished and have been very supportive. (S14, 6/02/19)

She continued: ‘I now work mainly from home and it is very difficult to fit this in around home education,’ making no mention of her family’s reaction to these compromises on her part. In fact, although participants reported such voiced concern from family and friends for the wellbeing of children removed from schools, and admiration for parents’ efforts, no respondents mentioned of others’ apprehension concerning parental wellbeing. It is perhaps conceivable that the apparently blinkered attitude of those offering their views may sometimes add to feelings of isolation or even ostracisation for a new home educating parent.

A change of perspective is not always universal, as one parent outlined:

One side of the family (notably the retired schoolteachers) is wholly supportive, the other rather vehemently opposed. (S79, 24/03/19)

Some families feel supported from the outset: ‘all of our friends and family thought we were very brave but completely understood never once got a negative remark’ (S67). Others appear proud to be held in high regard, whilst realising that this view is far from ubiquitous:

A friend of ours who is a teacher holds us up as 'good practice' [...] so it's nice that we have played a part in challenging prejudices. (S76, 18/03/19)

Parents describe their relief at the positive effect of beginning home education for their children, often reflecting that they should have switched earlier. One parent summarised:

Home Education has been the saving of my son and our whole family. He is now absolutely thriving. His relationships both within and beyond our family have been transformed. We have NEVER looked back it was the best thing
I ever did. Wish I had never sent him to school in the first place. (S73, 18/03/19)

This transformative experience described in comments by many parents is expressed by another:

We didn't choose [home education] but we have learned so much [...] Ours has been a story of moving from a negative to a positive and seeing our daughter finally take off as she should. I did have to sell my business and make some huge changes and yet the outcome now is a positive one. (S22, 6/02/19)

A parent who had home educated her autistic child following school difficulties, considered enrolling her younger children when they reached school age and visited local schools. Faced with staff who, as Scotcher and Boden (2018) suggest, seemed ‘overstretched’, she reflected:

When I compare that struggling, lacking, possibly traumatic environment with what I can provide at home there really isn't any debate about what's best. [...] I want my children to feel safe, inspired and curious, not burnt out. (S54, 4/03/19)

With her eldest home educated child now at university, such confidence is perhaps unsurprising; furthermore, notwithstanding its subjectivity, such damning parental perspectives of a school’s preparedness to support children arguably demand consideration.

Parents outlined what might enhance their children’s home education. In total, 40% of participants (n=37) made suggestions including a resources bank, access to facilities, events, tuition, or flexi-schooling. Support for GCSEs was mentioned by 24% (n=22), with specialist support and assessment related to children’s needs listed by 14% (n=15). Describing the role of the local authority, 12% (n=11) said that communication should be more accurate, 20% (n=19) stated that this should support rather than monitor, and 12% (n=11) felt that there was insufficient understanding of children’s needs or why families deregistered.
My findings are contextualised through five survey illustrations presented in Section 4(b), followed in Chapter 5 by five more substantial interview case studies and children’s participation. A list of weblinks to the home education information, support groups, activity providers, online tuition and educational resources named by participants is presented in Appendix 12 (Table 10).
4 (b) Survey illustrations

Table 4 Overview of participants: survey illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Survey illustration pseudonyms and information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Anna Mother and main home educator to Josh and Clara South East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rachel Mother to Ryan and Ben, home educated with support from her own father, the children's grandfather London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Emily Mother and main home educator to Rob until his enrolment at FE college Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lizzie Wife of Tom, who was the main home educator to their son Alfie South East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lucy Mother and main home educator to Eve East Midlands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illustration 1: Anna, Josh and Clara (S6)\textsuperscript{15}

Anna, a graduate, home educated Josh, diagnosed with ASC, and his sister Clara. She reported responsibility for her children’s education, though decisions were made jointly with her partner.

Anna said Josh’s early talent for mathematical concepts was evident before school age and she did not expect to ‘end up home educating’. After starting school, Josh began having ‘meltdowns’ at home which, Anna believed, resulted from his effort of ‘masking’ at school. Anna considered that Josh was bullied by his Year 1 teacher and reported that, aged six, he began to say he did not want to live.

Aged 8, Josh was diagnosed with an autistic spectrum condition. His paediatrician provided recommendations to help the school support Josh’s autism-related needs. However, from the school’s perspective no accommodations were necessary, as Josh coped in class.

\textsuperscript{15} 5/2/19, South East, Anna describes herself as White-British and a member of the Church of England
At home, the frequency and intensity of Josh’s emotional breakdowns escalated; he had begun self-harming and hurting his younger sister. This impacted Anna’s, and both children’s, mental health. In desperation, she filmed her son to demonstrate the impact of unmet needs at school on his life beyond the classroom. Anna showed the headteacher, who responded, ‘It doesn't happen at school so it's not my problem.’ This prompted Anna to de-register Josh immediately.

She put her career on hold and had not worked since undertaking home education of Josh and then Clara, who ‘became distressed at being left in school’. Whilst Anna expected Clara to re-enrol for secondary education, she felt Josh would never be able to attend a mainstream senior school.

Josh seemed happier within days of deregistering, but Anna explained it took two years for ‘symptoms of school trauma to disappear’. By following his interests, ‘he started to thrive academically, and his self-esteem rose as he realised his strengths were being supported.’ Anna managed to secure EHC plan personal budget funding for Josh. Without this funding for tutors and exams, she believed the family would be unable to support Josh to meet his academic potential.

Josh made many friends. He achieved A* in maths GCSE aged 12 and a black belt in karate at 13. A typical home educating day might include a walk, a one-to-one maths lesson with his EHC plan-funded tutor, a group lesson with other children followed by his karate class. Josh and Clara joined clubs and societies, they participated in workshops at museums and forest school or run by parents.

Anna sustained a purposeful resilience:

The impact of lack of support by school has had a huge detrimental effect on the family but thanks to motivation, determination and tenacity, we have been able to ensure the children have thrived within home education.

Their local authority employed elective home education officers to engage with families who asked for help. Anna felt this provision would be better if officers had experience of autism and ‘SEN’. Ideally, she felt greater access to specialist teacher support for Josh would enable her to work, for financial reasons and her own self-esteem.

Illustration 2: Rachel, Ryan and Ben (S8)¹⁶

Rachel, a graduate and single mother with experience in school outreach, home educated Ryan and Ben with her father.

Rachel had hoped to home educate because, from work observations, she ‘did not like the way children were treated in the school system’. However, she enrolled Ryan at school because her baby son, Ben, was very unwell, necessitating frequent hospital visits. She explained Ben’s ill-health to school and how this was stressful for Ryan.

Ryan struggled to acquire early academic skills; his Reception teacher told Rachel he did not listen or try hard enough and was disruptive. At Rachel’s first parents’ evening, she was informed Ryan was ‘significantly behind’ and told that she ‘needed to do much more work with him at home if [she] expected him to catch up’. Ryan missed his play-based sessions in class to work on phonics with a teaching assistant. Previously ‘artistic and fun-loving’, he would be ‘furious and upset’ when collected from school. Chastising Ryan for inattention and requiring him to work while classmates enjoyed free play only ‘made matters worse’ and Rachel felt school failed to provide appropriate support.

¹⁶ 5/2/2019 London, Rachel describes herself as Mixed-White and Black Caribbean
Rachel withdrew Ryan at Easter in his Reception year. The school acknowledged deregistration in writing. Two months later, the local authority sent a letter requiring her to register online as a home educator. In the meantime, Rachel had contacted home education groups. She had learnt that there was no legal requirement for her to register and ‘politely decline[d] and state[d] that assistance was not needed and that [she] knew [her] rights and the law.’

Later, Rachel moved with her sons to help her father care for her mother, and so her father could support her sons’ learning. This borough seemed to offer no information for home educators. Rachel ‘quite like[d] the hands-off approach’, but believed Ryan was dyslexic, and was frustrated that local authority educational psychology services were not available to home educating families.

After deregistration, Rachel did not ‘force work onto’ Ryan. In fact, it took eight months for him to engage in formally presented learning opportunities. When he was seven, she ‘began adding structure’ to their days, scheduling academic learning activities.

Rachel accessed discounted subscriptions and resources via home educator groups. Cost could be an issue, so Rachel supplemented these with free online materials. Their days typically comprised maths and literacy activities at home in the morning and broader learning opportunities in the afternoons, at home, in a museum with one or two home educated friends or a larger group. Rachel explained:

I will never know that HE is the best option for them as I do not know all of the options; however, comparing my son now to how he was in school, I can see that he is significantly happier and is learning well at his own pace and in his own style.
She had no set plans for Ryan’s return to formal, school-based education but planned to reassess ahead of the secondary school registration deadline.

Illustration 3: Emily and Rob (S19)  
Emily completed undergraduate study as a mature student. She gave up work to be the main home educator for her eldest child, Rob, and the family managed on her partner’s income.

Throughout primary school, Rob’s teachers reported surprise at the difference between his spoken contribution and written work; however, no assessment was offered. As he progressed through school, his writing was described as messy and disorganised, and teachers would sometimes remove pages from his books and require him to re-do the work. Over time, his self-esteem suffered, and he began to show physical signs of distress, suffering mouth ulcers and bladder irritation.

Instead of transferring to secondary school, Rob chose home education. The family’s decision was not accepted by Emily’s parents initially, and they suggested that Rob’s life would be ‘ruined’. Rob was always free to return to school; he trialled a local secondary for half a day and vowed never to set foot in a school again.

No help for home educators was available from the local authority, who provided a booklet that Emily described as factually incorrect and focused on parents’ need to follow the school curriculum and timetable to facilitate a reintegration to school. No home education advice was offered on the authority’s website. Emily felt that the authority’s interest lay in monitoring, rather than supporting home educators.

17 6/2/19, Wales, Emily describes herself as White British and a member of the Church in Wales
Emily described difficulties for them both adapting to new routines in the first year and said she missed work for adult company as well as income. However, the close learning partnership that they built during this time meant that she realised there was ‘more [to Rob’s school-based difficulties] than just messy handwriting.’ Local authority assessment was not available to them as home educators and so the family engaged an educational psychologist, who diagnosed specific learning difficulties, and recommended the use of a laptop and extra time for written work, including exams.

Emily considered that she facilitated her son’s learning rather than teaching him. Initially, Rob found writing so difficult that Emily scribed for him, but as he began to study for exams and use a laptop, his confidence grew. He studied history through watching documentaries and enjoyed practical science experiments. Days learning at home followed general rather than set patterns and would be affected by the weather or the season, with a wide range of activities including bowling, cookery, philosophy, biking, climbing and horse-riding. Emily described following her son’s lead, extending or curtailing subjects according to his interest rather than curriculum demands, and benefitting from learning collaboratively with local groups.

Rob thrived without pressure, motivated by having chosen his own subjects and activities. He studied Spanish online for fun, completed IGCSE maths in eight months, and had plans to study at university. Tutors at his FE college remarked on his independence as a learner.
Illustration 4: Lizzie, Tom and Alfie (S36)\textsuperscript{18}

Lizzie and Tom had postgraduate and professional qualifications; Tom home educated Alfie.

Lizzie and Tom imagined Alfie would follow ‘a normal progression through school leading on later to university.’ Considering their youngest child’s ‘struggles’ at preschool due to immaturity, they enrolled him at a small school; however, Alfie did not settle. In Reception, his autism diagnosis afforded a learning support assistant through high needs funding. His parents worried Alfie ‘spent an increasing amount of time outside the classroom,’ but were reassured he was ‘generally happy’.

In Year 2, his teacher ‘did not understand his ASD’, and Alfie ‘became increasingly anxious with more challenging behaviour’. Eschewing ‘strategies in which she had been trained’, Alfie’s assistant was instructed to be ‘firmer [...] and things go much worse’. Alfie was shut in a room on his own at school as punishment and refused to return to school after Christmas.

His parents applied for EHC assessment; Alfie returned to school, where he ‘was too anxious to see his teacher or any other children’ and was taught separately by the assistant. The EHC plan specified a specialist setting, but no placement was available, so Alfie was to remain at the primary school. The educational psychologist who had assessed Alfie during the EHC process had ‘noted his anxiety and hypervigilance [...] indicated that mainstream was not suitable for his needs,’ and parents were ‘advised not to send him back into school as it was

\textsuperscript{18} 3/3/19, South East, Lizzie describes herself as White British
having a detrimental effect'. In September of Year 3, Alfie’s GP ‘signed him off on grounds of being too anxious to attend school.’

Tom gave up work to home educate Alfie, which impacted the family financially. Nevertheless, they felt the move was positive for their son, who became ‘more able to engage with academic work away from the stresses of the school environment’.

At home, Alfie’s learning day began when his brother left for school. He made a list with his father of the day’s learning, which ‘always include[ed] maths, English, reading and some exercise, with other topic work or typing or construction etc., as they decide[ed…].’ Alfie’s former headteacher, who had experience of children with a range of learning difficulties provided additional tutoring. Lizzie reflected that school would probably always have been difficult for Alfie:

Ultimately, given his diagnoses and sensory sensitivities, he would never have been able to thrive in a mainstream school. However, with better training of staff and a more sympathetic understanding and, had they listened more to us and taken us seriously, a lot of trauma could have been avoided.

Alfie remained on role awaiting a place in specialist provision. Despite school’s initial offer, no work was sent home for Alfie, and so all resources were at the family’s expense. Lizzie and Tom lodged an appeal to cover the provision outlined in his EHC plan through EOTAS until a placement became available.

Illustration 5: Lucy and Eve (S71)¹⁹

Lucy, a university lecturer, home educated six-year-old Eve. Both parents worked from home to balance their professional commitments and home educate Eve.

¹⁹ Survey responses: 14/3/19, Skype interview, concept map and follow-up email: 20/7/20, additional correspondence and participant-checking: 13/8/20, East Midlands, Lucy describes herself as White British and agnostic
Lucy described Eve as a quiet child who was sometimes anxious and had not settled well at playgroup. The summer before she was due to start school, Eve said that she did not want to go, and the family agreed to wait a year. The school suggested that Eve could attend on a part-time basis. They discussed this as a family and decided to start school part-time. However, once enrolled, staff encouraged Eve to stay all day, and after two weeks, she was attending on a full-time basis. After the first week of full-time school, for Lucy and her partner, the difference in their child was stark; she no longer seemed happy in herself, and she had begun to cry in the evenings and said she was afraid of some children at school, and that grown-ups did not have time for her.

Lucy was not able to speak directly with the class teacher, who seemed overwhelmed with her workload and would be seen working at a computer at the end of a school day. This left day-to-day parent interactions to the teaching assistants, and Lucy had no sense that her concerns were relayed to other staff.

At a music workshop, Eve’s reaction to a shaken tambourine was to immediately put her hands on her head, although this was not expected. That such a routine had been so powerfully ingrained in such a short time at school confirmed to Lucy that the school had not been right for her daughter.

Lucy considered that if Eve had been allowed to continue on a part-time basis for longer, and if staff had listened to their concerns, Eve would not have left after half a term and might still be in in school. For Eve, not feeling safe meant that there was nothing to look forward to at school. As a family, they decided not to return after the half term break to 'see what happens, and just let things take their course'.
Lucy began home education with similar set activities every day. However, she explained that it did not feel ‘natural’, and that Eve got bored quickly. Eve naturally developed creative adaptations to such tasks, such as incorporating drawing into her name-writing practice, or deliberately writing unconventionally, and Lucy realised that Eve would learn more quickly through having fun.

Their local authority home education advisor was a former primary school teacher, who visited annually. Eve liked her, and Lucy found the visits reassuring, because her positive assessment seemed to validate their home education endeavours.

Whilst no resources or materials were available, the advisor sent an updated list of websites that other home educators had found useful following each visit. Their intention remained that Eve would enrol at a school when she felt ready.

Summary of survey data and illustrations
Parents reported their efforts to navigate a school system that offers a statutory promise of equality and support, to be met by obstacles that must, at times, have seemed incomprehensible. Experience of the system did not help; 18% of respondents had worked in education and participants gave examples such as that of S86 (p.102) whose son’s headteacher had described a six-year ‘fight’ to secure support for her own child. Families faced barriers to children’s needs being recognised, or, if acknowledged, supported. School, local authority or NHS assessments were difficult to arrange, and might not secure an EHC plan or Statement of SEN. Schools lacked resources, funding, training, or, at times it seemed, the desire to overcome their own barriers to providing support. As also noted by Clements and Aiello (2021), participants told of feeling disbelieved by staff at school, and of finding themselves under investigation or being reported to social services, echoing the experiences of parents falsely accuse of fabricated and induced illness or factitious illness outlined by PCA (2019). These findings
Survey responses revealed families’ circumstances and processes related to transitions: a planned transition to formal education, and a later, largely unexpected, transition to home education. Parents described the processes they underwent in their efforts to secure positive educational experiences for their children in schools, and eventually outside mainstream formal educational settings. These responses address the aspect of my research question related to transitions within home education. Participants outlined the extent to which decisions related to school and beginning home education and evolving home education practices are mediated by supportive networks of parents with similar past experiences.

The five selected illustrations provide an overview of a range of varied yet overlapping circumstances experienced by the 93 families participating in my survey. Reports of perceived difficulties and access to diagnostic services vary from child to child, yet each case presents a perspective of parent-school miscommunication and unmet children’s needs at school. These ultimately led to children’s deregistration from school and the subsequent development of home-based practices. This will be discussed in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 5, three detailed family case studies are presented, along with shorter contributions from the seven children, including survey data responses from one young person, and two parent-only interview cases. Family dynamics varied: data relate to four one-child families, two three-child families, and one five-child family. One parent was a single mother, one a single father and five were two-parent families. Four of the seven participant children were under ten years old. Parent participants additionally described the home education experiences of non-
participant children, including three who were no longer of compulsory school age and one who was flexi-schooling. Eleven of the twelve cases result from face-to-face participation, which enabled additional depth of enquiry as well as clarification at times. Whilst each family’s experience is unique, similarities and parallels can be seen between their circumstances and the processes, transitions and practices shared by survey participants.
## 5. Findings: fieldwork

### Table 5 Overview of participants: family interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study pseudonyms and information</th>
<th>Wales</th>
<th>Midlands</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Minnie Mother and main home educator to Hermione, Teddy and Rainbow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Jack Mother and main home educator to Ella as well as Zander and Molly, until their enrolment at FE college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Ramona Mother and sole home educator to Matilda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5.1 Family 1: Minnie, Hermione, Teddy and Rainbow

Minnie, a masters graduate and former public servant considered herself ‘conditioned’ to send her children to school, though she had not enjoyed school herself as a child. She deregistered her daughters during the summer term when twins Hermione and Teddy were nine, and Rainbow was seven. The children’s father worked away from home; Minnie’s mother helped out with home education.

#### Circumstances

When she first started school, it became clear to Minnie that Hermione was not settling. Hermione did not reveal this herself; Teddy reported that her twin was often in trouble and unhappy: incidents that were confirmed when Minnie checked with the girls’ teacher. In Reception, Hermione would regularly vomit during PE on Wednesdays. This would mean that Hermione was required to stay home from school for two days, returning the following Monday, a pattern that continued into Year 3.

Although never formally diagnosed, Minnie considered herself dyslexic. After a series of incidents, given Hermione’s apparent difficulties acquiring skills for academic tasks despite seeming very bright, Minnie wondered whether her daughter’s problems at school related to dyslexia. The school explained that they

---

20 Interviews and concept maps 20/11/18, educational visit 22/11/18, follow up Skype interview: 28/8/20, additional correspondence and participant-checking 5/2/19 and 24/10/20, Wales, Minnie describes herself as White British
could not provide assessment and so Minnie engaged an educational psychologist privately. The psychologist referred them on for investigation related to an autistic spectrum condition. The psychologist’s concern was that lack of appropriate support could lead to school phobia. This was not something the family had ever considered, and Minnie sought advice at school. The headteacher again stated that school was unable to support a referral.

Both Minnie and her mother, a former teacher, were upset to see Hermione’s growing daily distress on arrival at school. The family contacted a local NHS paediatrician, who diagnosed ASC when Hermione was seven. Minnie asked at school what help would be available for Hermione; the headteacher said school could not fund support and the family should make their own arrangements. When another privately funded cognitive assessment confirmed dyslexia, Minnie arranged for Hermione to attend an independent charity-run dyslexia school each Wednesday. Once this arrangement was in place, Hermione managed four days each week in her mainstream setting, finally breaking the pattern of sickness and absence that had started in Reception.

At the beginning of Year 4, the school agreed to support Minnie’s application for Hermione to be assessed for a statement of SEN. Reflecting experiences of families in England (Ofsted 2018), this was refused by the local authority on the grounds that the school had not followed procedure regarding first-line interventions or communication of diagnoses to the authority’s specialist team. At the same time, the authority said that Hermione’s absence from school to attend the independent specialist setting each Wednesday was not permitted.

Minnie engaged with the local autism support team and the SpLD team but also consulted a solicitor to contest the refusal to assess. The solicitor wrote to the
school and authority, and although official permission was not granted for Hermione to attend the independent setting, no further action was taken against the family, and so flexi-schooling continued. At school, someone from the SpLD team saw Hermione, recommending that written work be kept to a minimum, and that alternatives to writing should be accommodated. This happened in the shape of an iPad provided by the family with pre-installed apps chosen and paid for by Minnie. The autism specialist recommended a safe space be created in the classroom, where Hermione could go if she felt overwhelmed. By the end of the spring term, Hermione was spending hours most schooldays in a children’s play tent that the class teacher had brought in from home and completing little or no academic work during the school day. Minnie, by now self-educated in inclusive practice, had joint meetings with school staff and members of the autism and SpLD teams. However, neither school nor the authority seemed equipped to find a practicable, timely way for Hermione to access the classroom’s learning opportunities.

A critical moment came when Teddy, Hermione’s twin became unwell, and the family’s GP diagnosed school anxiety. Minnie attributed this to years of ‘witnessing what was going on with [Hermione]’ at school. She explained that her daughter had been shouldering her sister’s negative experience from the very beginning:

[Teddy] told me in Reception that ‘[Hermione]’s no good at school.’ – and now – looking back – with the anxiety – [she] was witnessing her sister having a horrendous time.

Suddenly, it seemed to the family that school was not the best place for two of the three children. Teddy was signed off school for two weeks, during which time Minnie took her to group activities run by local home educators. Minnie had considered home education for Hermione but was worried about the impact on her daughter of a trial if the family decided not to follow this route:
...if I’d taken her, she’d instantly want to join in, and that would have been, like, the demise of school, really – she would have found her alternative.

Minnie took the opportunity to visit groups with Teddy because she ‘wanted to see what she thought of them, because out of my three, she’s quite level-headed […] I was shocked that [Teddy] thought it was a good idea – because she is middle-of-the-road child, and thought it was sensible, and that threw me.’

In our first interview, Minnie had suggested that the circumstances leading to the family beginning home education had been a sequence of events. However, reviewing this at our follow-up, she reflected:

I’m not sure if it was a series of pivotal moments, or if the system brought me here. I’ve come to the realisation now, I think, that the system brought me here. I didn’t bring me here, the system brought me here.

Transitions

A house move had been considered but put on hold due to the combined costs related to assessments, the independent setting’s fees and mounting legal bills. Deregistering from school and avoiding these expenses made a new house purchase feasible. Following this realisation, the decision seemed straightforward. After a family discussion with the children, they planned to move and begin home education the following academic year.

They moved in the summer term, intending to finish the academic year at school. Out of courtesy, Minnie wrote to the school when the purchase was complete. Their school plans changed after the headteacher spoke with Hermione:

...and asked her [...] about home education and how it would be [...] asking her what would happen when it doesn’t work.

Again, it was Teddy who alerted Minnie to Hermione’s ‘interview’ with the headteacher. Minnie was concerned that this could unsettle the children, ‘so I sent
another letter [...] and the day we handed that in they didn’t go back.’ Immediately, the household became more relaxed, with the loss of an hour’s daily commute. Minnie had been pre-teaching Hermione for around 40 minutes each day after school, or in the morning, or both, and had had her other daughters completing workbooks or online tasks at the same time.

After the children stopped attending school, Minnie adopted what she called a ‘semi-structured’ approach. A typical day might start with the children waking naturally and going to check their learning tasks for the day. They continued with the educational subscription websites they had used to support school maths and English, and each daughter completed work online on weekdays at home. The sisters learned to prepare and clear breakfast for each other, coordinate timings and note any ingredients running short. Minnie would write each child’s set activities for the day on individual whiteboards, placed on their desks in a converted bedroom equipped with everything needed for each task. At the back of her mind in maintaining this – albeit reduced – level of formality was the thought that the children ‘could possibly return to [secondary] school, and not [be] behind.’ When the time came to confirm their registration at the local secondary school, Minnie withdrew the application.

Once they had made the change, Minnie felt that home education was a better option for her children, including ‘because […] it’s far better for their mental health.’ She deliberately avoided reading up on educational theory and philosophy because she worried that she might question herself too much as a result; she believed that ‘most of it’s just common sense, isn’t it?’

Two years into home education, Minnie’s practice had evolved. Although she had from the start, looked to the children’s interests for planning, this had moved on
from selecting Outschool\(^2\) courses together for the three children while Minnie planned complimentary resources, activities and visits. Recognising the value of activities arranged by home educator groups, she began to realise the efforts that go into planning and running sessions, and that whilst this is ‘not a formal organisation’, she considered ‘the community exists because of other people doing that sort of thing [...] actually organising that event’.

Minnie soon began organising events for local home educators, including for example, visits to a lighthouse or Guide Dogs for the Blind, stargazing, bushcraft. She explained that she sometimes took a calculated risk on the cost of such activities, how many people would be interested, and whether she might end up out of pocket. In fact, she believed that the ‘community’ looked out for its members, with those who could easily afford to pay often covering the costs for others who might not.

Minnie describes Internet access as something that makes home education more manageable for her. Having considered Interhigh\(^2\) early in her thoughts of home education, she rejected their ‘online school at home’ model due to cost and its relatively inflexible offering that mimics a traditional primary school day. Her initial decision to plan each child’s day-to-day activities separately began to take its toll due to the time required from her, as well as managing to juggle between platforms and subscriptions. At the end of their first year at home, she found My Online Schooling\(^3\), which offers individual subject courses. The flexibility for the children to choose subjects that interest them, combined with multiple subject and

\(^1\) https://outschool.com
\(^2\) https://interhigh.co.uk/
\(^3\) https://myonlineschooling.co.uk/
sibling discounts appealed to Minnie. Lessons are recorded, which meant that Minnie was able to re-watch with any of the children if they needed help.

As well as maths, English and science, Hermione chose history, and was inspired to start researching topics herself, something Minnie could never have imagined her doing before. Minnie explained that, after the first months of home education, Rainbow had rejected formalised learning at home, and they had adopted an ‘unschooling’ approach for her. A year later, she coped with online lessons aimed at older children. Aged 9, she was starting Year 6 maths, science and English as well as senior school level foreign languages, including French and Mandarin.

Teddy had attended sessions with a local artist and had been learning to weld and create her own designs. One of her chosen online subjects was DT, and Minnie enrolled Rainbow in the same class so that they could work on projects together.

Minnie considered their current model of home and online learning sustainable in the long term:

> And I think [...] the virus has shoved [schools], if you ask me, about ten years ahead of themselves... I thought we’d get there because of environmental impact issues... I said to the kids: when you’re an adult, and you tell people what you did, they’ll say ‘God, your mother was really innovative!’

Meighan (1997) might have agreed with her, in terms of his conviction that home educators were ‘trailblazers’ in education, not least in the way that he envisaged their use of the Internet.
5.2 Family 2: Jack and Ella

Jack had home educated for over a decade since her older daughter’s primary school placement broke down. She now home educated her 13-year-old daughter Ella, who had never been to school. Ella has Down syndrome.

Circumstances

Jack moved for her husband’s teaching job shortly before the birth of their first child, Molly. She decided to stay at home with the baby, as they had no extended family in the local area, and childcare costs would have been prohibitive. By the time Molly started school, her son Zander had been born. One of the youngest children in her school year, Molly moved from nursery to the Reception class at a new school with some of her nursery cohort.

Jack described a cycle of school anxiety that began in Reception and peaked in Year 1 following a bout of whooping cough. Molly became ill around Easter and was not well enough to return to school at the start of the summer term. When she returned to school, her distress at the start of the school day increased. Each day the teacher would encourage Jack to leave the classroom although Molly was crying. Jack began to wait in the corridor, hoping that Molly would settle. Eventually, distressed that the teacher seemed not to try to help Molly, Jack spoke to the head, who responded, ‘she’s not really very touchy-feely.’

Molly’s Year 2 experience was better. Her teacher seemed able to avert possible issues before they developed, regularly changing the children’s seating arrangements and staying on top of potential bullying. However, the situation deteriorated again in Year 3. From starting school, Molly had suffered night terrors during term-time. She began to complain of debilitating stomach aches, so Jack

---

24 Interviews and concept map 28/8/19, educational visit 9/10/29, in-person participant-checking 5/12/19, West Midlands, Jack describes herself as White British
took Molly to the GP, who explained there were no digestive difficulties, but diagnosed stomach migraines.

Both parents had always sensed that things were not right for Molly but had hoped that Year 1 was an extreme situation. Jack recalled bullying being part of her own school experience and regretfully hoped that Molly would understand that life can bring ‘knocks’ and that she should try to ‘stand up to bullies’. At the same time, as parents, they feared that intervening with school on her behalf, or moving school, would not be realistic life lessons. Then, during the school holidays between Years 3 and 4, as they prepared for the new school year, Molly began to talk openly about her experience with teachers and bullying from other children. This was the first time that Molly had discussed her feelings, and Jack decided to contact the head before the start of term to try find a way to help her daughter. The head was sympathetic and met Jack with Molly to reassure her that supportive measures would be put in place.

Molly returned to school in Year 4 full of hope, but she soon felt that nothing had changed, and the night terrors and stomach migraines began again. Jack described these episodes as being so vivid that she would find herself looking around the room for a physical cause, almost expecting to see a monster in the corner. Molly’s brother Zander was just starting Reception, and the constant broken nights were affecting the whole family. Jack decided to seek advice.

**Transitions**

Jack contacted the local authority education department and put in touch with the county’s home education coordinator. They talked, and the coordinator offered to connect the family with a local home educators’ group; she also recommended that they visit a small school outside the city on the edge of a nearby town. Jack
said, ‘It was a lovely school, beautiful grounds, nice teachers,’ but it was a 20-minute drive away, and she realised on the way home that once Molly started secondary school in the city, it would not be practicable for the family.

Jack had taken the children to a session at the home educators’ group. The first week, Molly and Zander had quickly made friends. Following the school visit, they went to another session. She explained, ‘We pulled up in the car and, amazingly, they both got out the car and went to find their friends before I even got everything out of the car and I thought, “well that really tells me what I need to know”.’ The next morning, Jack was getting the children ready for school, when her decision was made for her:

[Molly] started crying and shaking and what have you and I thought, I picked up the phone and I told [school] that [the children] weren’t going in. And that was the end of that. It was as simple as that. You know, there wasn’t any massive train of thought to it, when it came down to it, I didn’t just ring to say, I’m not bringing her in today, she’s too distressed, it was, ‘we’re not doing this anymore’

Jack began home educating Molly aged 8 (school Year 4) and Zander aged 4 (Reception) when Ella was a tiny baby. The [county] home education coordinator visited them at home from time to time in first 2 years of HE. Her visits included spending time sitting on the floor with the children, chatting with them about their learning. She would bring second-hand books for them and developed a relationship with the family based on trust. There were no written reports, but she would ask Jack whether she had any questions, or whether they needed help with anything. The family continued attending weekly sessions with the home education group.

Jack was shocked to find that parents she had met through school and previously socialised with were no longer interested in play dates or other meetups. She had
no support network outside the home education group. To balance this, she took control of the day during school term-times when her husband was at work. This would mean that on days when they were not involved in an activity outside the home, Molly and Zander would be expected to sit down and focus on academic tasks each morning from around 9:30 am and again after lunch and some free play. If the children were able to work independently, Jack would get on with housework, domestic paperwork and tending to Ella. They joined Brownies and Cubs, with Zander progressing to Sea Cadets and Molly developing as an independent learner accessing the Internet to follow her own interests. Jack describes her style of home education as structure with elements of choice and without performance or social pressure.

Two years after the family began home education, the familiar coordinator took a job in a different area. Jack had no concerns when her replacement called to make an initial appointment. The new elective home education officer arrived, explained that she was a former primary school teacher who had taken early retirement and that she had no experience of home education, but that the job had come up and she had thought ‘Why not?’ She ‘asked lots of questions and seemed really interested and said everything was fine’ before leaving. Soon after, a letter and report from the new officer arrived, addressed to Jack’s husband, who had been at work on the day of the visit, and with the children’s names misspelt. She was surprised to receive a report and appalled that the letter was not addressed to her. Jack explained, ‘She wrote that she had concerns that Molly’s and Zander’s education might begin to suffer as Ella reached an age where I wanted to begin teaching her, because she felt that I would not be able to cater for her and meet the older children’s needs at the same time.’

Jack called the officer, who seemed surprised that she was angry:
I told her there and then that she would not have access to our home again. In all honesty, since then, I have submitted an annual report to her in writing, and she has never questioned anything. Each year, before I think she’s even had time to read the thing, I get an email back saying, ‘Thank you very much for the update, I’m glad to hear everything is going well.’

Unsurprisingly, the officer’s name came up at home educator group meetings from time to time. Jack hoped that a lesson was learnt from that early interaction, because although she heard mixed reports of families’ experiences, she had never heard a story as negative as theirs.

In terms of resources, whereas Molly and Zander learnt a lot from textbooks, these were not suitable for Ella. Jack explained that the visual acuity of children with Down syndrome is not the same as for typical children. This means that many educational resources are not accessible, regardless of their intended level. Jack found ‘a handful of websites’ and a worksheet generator that formed the basis of her resources for Ella.

No advice or support, beyond a list of exam centres, was available from the local authority as her older children approached GCSEs or when her son required exam access arrangements to be applied for. Jack contacted the local education department to ask for help for Ella, when she was discharged from NHS speech therapy services on reaching the age of eleven. The response was ‘no, we don’t do that,’ and no further advice was offered. When we first spoke, I was able to let Jack know that Ella should in fact still be eligible to access local support services, and Jack called them again. Subsequently, she received email communication form the county SEND department explaining that they were in discussion with the speech and language therapy team on the family’s behalf and that someone should be getting back to them to arrange a meeting. When we last spoke, after over two years of research and frequent chasing, no practical help had been
arranged. Jack described the local authority’s current online information related to home education as ‘minimal’, with links and references to central government information. A check following our meeting confirmed this.

Jack had gone on to co-run their local home educator group. She offered support to new home educators, including advice on how to deal with the local authority. She explained that families know that they are not obliged to accept a home visit, but that they feel they need to keep the authority ‘on side’. Families had frequently reported to her the requests of the home education officer to talk with children directly and to see their work at these early meetings. Jack described this as disconcerting for families who had withdrawn from school due to problems, and who felt their children were vulnerable to such authority figures.

5.3 Family 3: Ramona and Matilda

Ramona, a graduate and former nurse, deregistered Matilda from their local secondary school at the start of Year 8.

Circumstances

Matilda’s parents separated when she was two-and-a-half. The little girl could become frustrated, particularly as she began to do things more independently. Ramona wondered at the time whether her daughter might be experiencing emotional difficulties or stress. She later believed that this might relate to Matilda’s left-handedness, which had not yet been recognised. Matilda’s father was dyslexic, and Ramona’s sister had had some literacy difficulties, especially at school. However, although she was aware that dyslexia might affect her daughter,
too, Ramona put such thoughts aside because Matilda ‘seemed so advanced mentally.’

Before she started school, Ramona had felt that Matilda was ‘ready for it, because she was bright, and she seemed to want to learn.’ At the time, Matilda was equally happy to ‘instigate things [...] or just play on her own.’ On first moving to a Nursery class at the local school Matilda would often cry at drop off, but by Reception, she seemed happy at school. Outside school, they tried clubs and activities, but despite what Ramona described as her physical strength and grace, Matilda said she did not feel comfortable performing in front of others and found it difficult to follow set regimes and routines, for example, at ballet, where Ramona was told: ‘if she doesn’t sit down and do as she’s told she’s not welcome to come again.’

In Year 1, Matilda’s teacher reported that she was chatty and fidgety; at this stage, no learning-related concerns had been raised by school. Then, at a parent’s evening in Year 2, the teacher reported, ‘it’s like pulling teeth, I just can’t get her to write.’ Because of Matilda’s father’s and aunt’s dyslexia and her apparent difficulties in class, Ramona asked the school to screen her daughter but was told this was not possible until the age of seven. By Year 3, parents’ evening felt negative to Ramona, who recollected the teacher saying, ‘[Matilda] just won’t, she can’t seem to do this, it’s like her attention span isn’t there.’ Ramona felt confused by this apparent negativity, having previously been very impressed with the school’s reputation for pastoral care, and by the confidence and compassion she had seen in older pupils at the school. Ramona again brought up screening for dyslexia and was told, ‘well, we know it’s not dyslexia because she had this reading intervention, and she improved a lot.’ Ramona had not been informed of any support.
When Matilda was in Year 4, Ramona was invited to meet her teachers following low scores achieved in national testing. Ramona asked again for Matilda to be assessed by an educational psychologist but was persuaded instead to allow Matilda to re-sit the tests in quiet conditions. Ramona was told that Matilda’s new scores showed no cause for concern; however, her daughter informed her that she had been given the answers by the teaching assistant who supervised her.

Over time, Ramona considered moving Matilda to another school, but local options were limited. She considered home education but worried that this would not be possible for her as a single parent working part-time and with a limited budget. Ramona contacted the charity Action for Children and accessed advice from the county Child and Family team. No one met with Matilda, and Ramona was given parenting advice.

Matilda began to find school increasingly difficult. Teachers would ask students to collect and hand out marked work, and Matilda told Ramona how if, for example, a low spelling test score was seen by another child, it would be whispered about audibly. Teasing sometimes led to fights, and Matilda got into trouble. She felt bullied, but when she reported perceived playground taunts, adults told her that the other children were just joking.

Matilda began to experience prolonged feelings of nausea and stomach discomfort. Often, she would be sick, then, in accordance with the school’s 48-hour rule, she would have to stay home for two days. Ramona took her to their GP who described the feelings as nerves-related ‘butterflies’ resulting from stress and anxiety at school. Ramona persevered with the GP, and they were advised to try a gluten-free diet for 12 months to rule out digestive issues; this made no difference to the symptoms.
By the spring term of Year 6, Matilda’s attendance at school was 75%. Ramona arranged to meet with teachers at school. She had hoped that school might be able to refer to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or another local service to support Matilda. The situation escalated quickly following that meeting, and instead Ramona was called to a meeting with the headteacher and the local authority education welfare officer. They told her any future absence due to vomiting would be marked unauthorised, and that 10 days of cumulative unauthorised absences would result in a fine. Ramona asked for help for Matilda but was advised that emotional support or help to overcome anxiety was only available if her daughter was at school. Again, she requested assessment to explore any underlying reason for Matilda’s school difficulties but was told that these were attributable to her daughter’s declining attendance in Years 5 and 6.

She reminded the headteacher of Matilda’s history of difficulties with academic tasks and was told that these were not substantial or significant enough to warrant assessment or learning support. Ramona felt there was nowhere to go for help.

Ramona took Matilda back to the GP when she expressed suicidal thoughts. Matilda spoke to the doctor at length and described bullying at school throughout Key Stage 2, her feelings about school and her life. The GP was sufficiently alarmed to make an urgent referral to CAMHS, and Matilda was seen within two weeks. However, when required to repeat what she had told the GP, Matilda froze. The nurse discharged her, explaining that she needed to hear Matilda’s story first-hand. In desperation, Ramona contacted the Child and Family team and shared the contents of a note Matilda had written after she stopped coming out of her bedroom. The police came to the house to check on Matilda, a social worker was assigned, and she was referred again to CAMHS, who now provided support.
Matilda was put on the list for support from a youth intervention service (YIS) worker; however, she had fallen into a gap between provision for primary school children and that available to secondary students. Ramona received updates and some telephone support from the YIS manager over the summer, then, when Matilda started secondary school in the autumn term, there was no YIS worker available for her. Matilda was overwhelmed and her attendance quickly began to slip; she needed support to reintegrate back into school. They attended a Team Around the Family (TAF) meeting in September, where Ramona resolved that since listening to the professionals did not seem to be helping her child, she would listen to her child instead. She asked that Matilda be supported weekly whether she was in school or not and requested a course of equine therapy for Matilda. To her amazement, this was agreed, funded for 12 weeks with a YIS worker.

Matilda started back at school during the spring term, able to access support for limited, designated times with either the YIS worker or the school support mentor. She began on a reduced programme of maths and English classes. Due to the school’s two-week rolling schedule, and the availability of the mentor and YIS worker, it was hard to establish a steady routine, and Matilda’s timetable was somewhat erratic. Ramona asked again for Matilda to be assessed by an educational psychologist, and school agreed. Whether there was a miscommunication or missed appointment is not clear, but when Matilda presented herself prepared for the assessment, the assessor was not there, and she was handed an English test to complete. Ramona explained that results of the test were never shared, and the assessment was not rescheduled.

One day, Matilda returned home and said to Ramona, ‘if it’s not getting better from how much we’ve been trying, I don’t think it’s going to get better.’ Still trying to get Matilda to school, Ramona emailed school and the YIS manager to ask when the
support mentor or the youth worker would be available. The response was that no further accommodations were possible, Ramona explained, ‘So she didn’t go in [...] and then they took away the YIS support, and without that she couldn’t go in at all.’

**Transitions**

At a summer term follow-up to the TAF meeting, Matilda felt unable to speak to officials present because she felt she had ‘been let down by professionals so many times [...] she] didn’t trust them anymore.’ Ramona described the headmaster telling her, ‘It’s a binary decision, either yes she’s coming in, or no she’s not. You’re the parent, you decide.’ Over the summer, Ramona and Matilda decided jointly that they would begin home education rather than return to school. Matilda’s father reportedly supported this decision, having himself struggled and been unhappy at school.

Ramona explained that things were complicated for her as a single parent in receipt of Employment and Support Allowance, as she balanced the requirement to be looking for work with oversight from the local authority with regards to Matilda’s education. Although she knew an experienced home educator, Ramona had not seen it as an option for herself and Matilda:

> I’d never realised before that that was even a possibility, I thought you had to have a lot of money to make home education work, but now I realise there are a lot of people out there with the same sort of stories as us.

She went on: ‘before you start home educating you can’t always find them because they’re quite secretive’. She wondered whether that related to ‘a stigma about’ the practice. Matilda had not yet felt ready to attend a large home educators’ group event, but she met friends and was working towards meeting new people; she wondered whether an online option might work for her. They
used a range of learning materials, from online resources to Key Stage 3 workbooks. Matilda had begun a project on horses, using self-developed research methods, where she cross-checked facts found online to make sure her various sources were accurate. Ramona described a Five Ways to Wellbeing26 project that they were undertaking, from her own work as a mental health professional, where they spend time each day observing and making connections, building their own healthy living curriculum.

They felt that their mother-daughter relationship had become more trusting and equal since Ramona stopped mediating for the school with her daughter. Family members had been supportive, but friends had been surprised and one suggested that Ramona was being neglectful by home educating Matilda rather than sending her to school. Ramona concluded that home education may only be temporary for them, but it was the right thing for Matilda’s health and happiness at the time.

---

26 [https://neweconomics.org/2008/10/five-ways-to-wellbeing](https://neweconomics.org/2008/10/five-ways-to-wellbeing)
5.4 Parent interviews

Table 6 Overview of participants: parent interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview pseudonyms and information</th>
<th>Wales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Abbie</td>
<td>Mother and main educator to Ned until he began flexi-schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tim</td>
<td>Father and sole home educator to Kirk until his enrolment at FE college</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4.1 Abbie

Abbie returned to university part-time as a mature student when her youngest son, Ned started school. She suspended her studies and gave up work to home educate.

Circumstances

Ned had attended a local Welsh-medium primary school. The school was small, and Abbie hoped it would suit her youngest child, as she felt the bigger English-medium school his four siblings had attended had let down her middle son. Ned struggled to acquire early academic skills, and he would get into trouble for speaking English at school.

The school identified that Ned had additional needs and one-to-one support was put in place, but this was withdrawn when funding ran out. After that, Abbie felt, Ned got ‘lost’ in himself and in the school. Ned ‘felt quite worthless, because he couldn’t do what was expected of him,’ and began to refuse to go to school, saying ‘that he wanted to die because he would be better off dead because he was worthless, he couldn’t do it.’

Ned’s school report for the Autumn of Year 4 stated ‘Ned struggles with simple conversations in Welsh’. Abbie was horrified, as no teacher had indicated the

---

27 Interview 15/1/2019, participant-checking 27/1/2019, Wales
extent of her son’s difficulties communicating at school before. Abbie arranged a meeting with the school SENCo, who suggested that if the family considered transferring to an English-medium school, ‘I can’t tell you to make that decision, but I would say that if you were going to do something like that, probably sooner rather than later would be better.’

Transitions
The nearby English-speaking school was oversubscribed; the family felt home education was the only option. Ned lacked confidence to join in with local home educator group activities, and he withdrew from anything that looked like schoolwork. Abbie reviewed paperwork from school and realised that Ned had made no progress and had the same targets on his school individual education plan for two years. The family funded a private assessment for specific learning difficulties, and Ned was diagnosed dyslexic.

Having tested approaches to facilitate her son’s learning, Abbie felt that he needed more than dyslexia support and their GP referred Ned for neurodevelopmental assessment. An ADHD nurse wanted to discharge Ned, but her colleague referred on for autism assessment. At assessment, Ned did not meet the local criteria for autism diagnosis, but a nurse suggested the family apply for a statement of SEN for Ned and agreed to support this.

Abbie heard about a small, independent school with mixed-age classes. They borrowed from Ned’s grandparents to fund two days each week. Ned’s second year flexi-schooling was funded through the statement, on the condition that Ned see a local authority tutor weekly at home, to prepare him for transition to the special needs resource base at a local senior school. At the independent school, Ned had flourished, gained the confidence to read, write and mix with other
children. Abbie worried about what would happen if her son was forced to attend the resource base full-time in the future.

5.4.2 Tim

A self-employed professional and single parent, Tim reduced his contracted work to home educate Kirk.

Circumstances

Kirk moved in with his father in the summer of Year 7 and enrolled in the local comprehensive school, but he did not settle. Although he made friends, Kirk complained that teachers shouted, and the school was too loud.

Over the summer, Kirk began working with a tutor to learn Mandarin. Occasionally, he suggested additional tutors rather than returning to school. Tim laughed it off and said the cost would be prohibitive, but when September came, Kirk refused to attend school. Tim spent the first days of term trying to convince his son, but Kirk was beyond persuasion. Tim considered Kirk’s engagement and progress with Mandarin meant his son wanted to learn; he came to a realisation:

Why don’t I home educate [...] I didn’t sleep that night, into the next day, I just went, right, what can I do? [...] Is it possible? [...] I can do some of it myself.

Tim called Kirk’s mother, who insisted he and their son meet her at the school, which Kirk refused to do. She wrote to Kirk’s GP and social services, who followed up but had no concerns. A compromise was found through regular, detailed, email updates from Tim. Following deregistration, Tim heard nothing further from school.

28 Interview 17/1/2019, participant-checking, 25/1/2019, Wales
Transitions

Initially, Tim replicated school at home, but Kirk did not engage well, so they took a break from everything except Mandarin. Tim researched online tutoring but decided it was both expensive and restrictive. An engineer, he rationalised, ‘I know maths, physics, chemistry, I can get in people for other things, so I’ll do that.’ He conceded, ‘I don’t know how effectively I could have done it without the Internet [...] the Facebook group support [...] to find out [...] how to do the exams.’

Kirk built a computer and taught himself programming. They joined local groups and participated in educational visits organised by other home educators. Tim, usually the only father present, sometimes led science-related activities. One trip revealed the extent of what Tim considered Kirk’s ‘fear of schools’, when he was unable to get out of the car, having seen a school coach arrive at the venue.

Tim worried Kirk might struggle taking GCSEs in a local exam centre and managed to find a smaller school that offered facilities to home educated students. The sixth form college required five GCSEs; Kirk studied biology, chemistry, English, English literature, history, maths and physics. One reason for not taking more exams was cost, £150 per subject. They used a tutor for English language, but Tim facilitated the other subjects, switching texts to find a play Kirk enjoyed, and stopping maths for six months at one stage, when Kirk had ‘a mental block’.

Kirk thrived at college and went on to university. Tim found the transition back to full time work harder than expected. Local home educator groups were no longer welcoming, though he continued as an active participant online.
5.5 Child interviews and survey participation

Table 7 Overview of participants: children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Children's pseudonyms and information</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rainbow: Daughter of Minnie and sister to Hermione and Teddy, school educated until Year 2</td>
<td>Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teddy: Daughter of Minnie and sister to Hermione and Rainbow, school educated until Year 4</td>
<td>Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hermione: Daughter of Minnie and sister to Teddy and Rainbow, school educated until Year 4</td>
<td>Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Becky: Survey participant, school educated until KS3, studying for GCSEs</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ella: Daughter of Jack and sister to Zander and Molly, never enrolled at school</td>
<td>West Midlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Matilda: Daughter of Ramona, school educated until Year 8</td>
<td>Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Eve: Daughter of Lucy, school educated briefly in Reception</td>
<td>East Midlands</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.5.1 Rainbow

Aged seven, Rainbow and her older sisters had been deregistered from school five months before. She said her favourite school activity had been trips, and she had liked story writing, but that school ‘was a bit difficult because I had loads of people in my class’. She felt strongly that school could be ‘unfair’ because ‘teachers just […] get annoyed sometimes and […] they’d be shouting’, recalling a particular incident where her entire class had been punished for speaking when she had been silent.

Rainbow was animated about her participation in the Literacy Planet WordMania competition with their online home educator group, PopArt competing against schools around the world. She contrasted the rush of getting up and getting ready for school with the ‘relaxing’ way the family home educated but said that one

---

29 As for Minnie – one-to-one interview and concept map 20/11/18, educational visit 22/11/18, additional correspondence and participant-checking 5/2/19, Wales
31 https://www.facebook.com/groups/302455799952156/
disadvantage of home education was ‘sometimes you have to go to loads of home ed groups’ (this was before her mother adopted the ‘unschooling’ approach with her, described above).

5.5.2 Teddy

Teddy, aged nine, said the best thing about school had been seeing friends. She remembered lessons in English, maths and Welsh, and said she had liked maths best, but that English had been hard. Teddy complained of being told off unfairly and said, ‘it happened quite a lot to [Hermione],’ her twin.

Her benefits of home education were: not rushing to finish one activity and start the next; using a laptop rather than writing everything on paper, which hurt her hand; eating and drinking when she was hungry or thirsty; choosing topics and activities; learning on her own online, or in a home education group, or with her mother or grandmother; trying out things she had learned for herself and choosing books to read, or research, for example, she had recently learned to draw animals from a book.

5.5.3 Hermione

Hermione declared ‘school sucks’ but said she missed friends from the specialist setting she had attended once a week, and one friend from her primary school.

She reported she ‘hate[d] writing’ and described feeling bullied at school, ‘in the playground […] I got picked on’ and by children in her class, who she said had burst fidget toys that had been provided for her.

32 As for Minnie – one-to-one interview and concept map 20/11/18, educational visit 22/11/18, additional correspondence and participant-checking 5/2/19, Wales
33 As for Minnie – one-to-one interview and concept map 20/11/18, educational visit 22/11/18, additional correspondence and participant-checking 5/2/19, Wales
Hermione stated that home education was better than school, 'because my mother is dyslexic, and she explains in a way that I understand [...] there's no bullying'.

Like her sisters, she talked about fairness:

- at school, 'they got cross with me when I just didn't understand, and it's not fair...'
- in home education, 'home ed groups are nice, and fair...'

Hermione chose to create a home education pros and cons list from a template in *Inspiration*, she listed no cons.

When I joined the family in a group activity, the three sisters welcomed me before beginning their activities. While they created Christmas decorations, younger children were helped by older children or adults, and the conversation centred on creative choices and technique, and the children's questions and interests. As the children completed their designs, they went to play together in the adjoining play area, watched by older children and in view of the adults. Conversation turned to how families had begun home educating. Four families had originally enrolled at school and three of the five families present indicated that home education had been undertaken to support at least one child with additional needs.

5.5.4 Becky (S72)

Becky was the only young person to participate directly in the online survey. She believed that smaller classes and more support would have improved her school experience and said that bullying was the prime reason for her beginning home education. Becky described herself as a 'slow learner at some subjects but with help, I can do it.'

---

34 Survey response: 16/3/19, South, Becky described herself as White Irish and Catholic
She explained that life became happier immediately following deregistration and stated that she had gone from being ‘two years behind at school now I am two years ahead.’ The family used a home education tuition company that works both directly with learners and online and provides access to external examinations. Learning happened at home with her mother’s support or through this provider every weekday. Becky reported missing some good friendships and particular lessons but said, ‘I much prefer home ed.’

5.5.5 Ella

Ella, thirteen, was confident and friendly as she showed me her work and toys when I visited the family home. We talked and played a game together, and Ella said that her favourite learning activity was ‘take away sums’. At times during the interview, her mother would build on Ella’s responses, or question her further to elicit more detail.

Ella said she knew about school because her friend at Brownies had told her about it. Asked whether she would like to go with her friends, she replied: ‘I don’t want to go to school’. She listed favourite activities, including visits to music performances at the local cathedral and ‘group’, where she likes to see friends and sometimes enjoys snacks and picnics.

When I joined their home education group some weeks later Ella participated quietly, sometimes guided by other children, sometimes going to explore independently. Her confidence grew across the day; in the morning I had noticed her looking to her mother, by the end of the afternoon, she was writing and posting notes in the comments box.

35 As for Jack – parent-supervised interview and concept map 28/8/19, educational visit 9/10/29, in-person participant-checking 5/12/19, West Midlands
5.5.6 Matilda

Matilda, twelve, had decided with her mother that she would not return to school at the start of the academic year, three months earlier. She catalogued her growing unhappiness while still at primary school as she:

used to get really stressed by it because [...] I would have to work slower than other people. Because if I rushed it, then I would end up mashing sentences together and it’s, ‘what you’re doing is wrong’ and [...] they would always say, ‘take your time’, but as I got to the end of the lesson, they’d always yell at me for not doing enough [...] and it was just really stressful.

Whereas Matilda reported previously enjoying seeing friends at school, by Year 6, she felt that some of her classmates were thinking of her as ‘the sick girl’ due to her frequent stress sickness and resulting absence. This sense continued as she started secondary school, eventually resulting in her inability to attend. She described her ideal learning environment as:

Freeing [...] where you can just do your work, but you can talk, you can make jokes, you can listen to music, you can move... you know? And there’s no time limit where you can take as long as you need, and you don’t have to rush everything...

Since beginning home education, Matilda had developed her own research techniques, making sure to cross-check facts. When we met, she was independently undertaking a self-initiated in-depth project on the evolution, domestication and specialisation of horse breeds using PowerPoint, a work-in-progress running to 56 pages. She worked with her mother at other times, accessing online and printed materials related to the school curriculum. Matilda created her own digital concept map while I interviewed her mother. This is shown in Appendix 6 (Figure 29).

36 As for Ramona – parent-supervised interview and concept map: 28/11/19, additional correspondence and participant-checking: 11/12/19, 09/01/20, 21/06/20, Wales
5.5.7 Eve

Six-year-old Eve would have been in Year 1 but was deregistered during the first term of Reception as she became increasingly anxious.

At school, Eve told me that she had liked reading in the book corner at school with friends. Asked what else she had liked; she could not remember anything. Eve explained that there had been some children who she was afraid of, and that one boy in particular had scared her. When she told a grown up, they would sometimes read with her, but more often they would encourage her to go and find other children to play with.

At home, Eve explained that she liked practical learning. She explained this was helpful because, ‘real things you can pick up. You can’t pick writing up, can you?’ She said she was enjoying working on 3- and 4-times tables. Eve proudly showed me some of her artwork, which she talked about enthusiastically. As I talked with her mother, Eve was reading a book about how to write poetry, as they were planning to spend the rest of the day writing poems. Whereas other concept maps were created with participants, or by the children themselves, Eve chose the design for hers and I completed it from her interview transcript with her approval, as shown in Appendix 6 (Figure 30).

5.6 Summary of fieldwork

The selected case studies aim to present experiences and voices that illustrate the range and depth of my data. These address my research question and offer a more detailed view of the circumstances leading seven families to undertake home education, as well as the processes experienced, and transitions undertaken. The views of children add a further dimension to these and to my parent survey data in

---

37 As for Lucy – parent-supervised Skype interview, concept map and follow-up email: 20/7/20, additional correspondence and participant-checking: 13/8/20, East Midlands
particular. These data were likewise augmented by the opportunity to ask questions and follow up on responses to gather thick detail in parent interviews. These provided rich data for later analysis, as hoped for and mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3. As discussed in Chapter 4, each situation is unique; however, there are noticeable parallels between interview and survey responses, and between the circumstances reported by different case study participants.

These highlight the evolving and, at times, nuanced nature of families’ breakdown in communication and their relationships with schools, and ultimately, belief and trust in the educational system. This is particularly evident in reports of parents’ frustration in relation to school and local authority miscommunication, and of delayed or denied access to services they felt were necessary. In terms of transitions within home education, participant responses related to their developing practices draw attention to the role both of already experienced home educators, and of the Internet, in facilitating transitions and the establishment of an alternative way of educating their children.
6. Analysis

6.1 Themes

As has been discussed throughout, my study does not seek to categorise individuals. Nevertheless, with reference to the first part of my research question: *What circumstances inform the transitions of families to home education?* commonalities between participants responses were noted and analysed. To some extent, this exercise reflected the stratum approach proposed by Rothermel (2003) to classify motives for beginning home education.

For my participants, the reported circumstances could be classified into four main groups as follows:

- Children’s needs were perceived unmet at school (100% of the 73 survey responses from families where children had attended school)
- Children became unable to attend (11% of the 73, n=8)
- Children were excluded (11% of the 73, n=8)
- Children had never attended (22% of the 93 UK responses, n=20).

Whilst the bracketed figures above relate to my survey responses, the circumstances also relate to my case study data. Arguably, the second and third classifications might be modified with the addition of: because their needs were unmet, and the fourth with: because their needs were not expected to be met. Moreover, each of these circumstances could be further broken down. For example, of those participants whose children had never been enrolled in schools, some had intended attendance but found no local or suitable school, and two children had not progressed to school from nursery due to dissatisfaction with the provision. Of the parents who had always intended to home educate, three were qualified and experienced educators disillusioned with the school system, and one reported being influenced by home educating friends who were teachers. One planned home educator described their own unhappiness in schools, and one had
been home educated. Examining the data, a range of varied and at times overlapping experiences and factors were evident in each set of circumstances.

These analyses revealed responses to the aspect of my research question related to the circumstances that inform the transitions of families within home education. Furthermore, they informed the selection and refinement of theoretical frameworks to understand the data, as it became evident that the first two themes: *Circumstances* and *Processes* informed the third: *Transitions*, and that all three contributed to the fourth: *Practices*.

The views shared by my participants reflect and expand on some reported in earlier studies (e.g., Kendall & Taylor, 2016; Wray & Thomas, 2013). These seem to highlight the diverging perspectives of parents and teachers with regard to children’s potential, or support provided, or both. At times, parents’ comments seemed to reflect the loss of trust and resulting complication of parent-school relationships described by Bormann and John (2014).

6.2 Circumstances

My findings of home education commencing after children’s needs were perceived as unsupported by 78% of participating parents seems to markedly differ from both Smith and Nelson’s (2016) and Arora’s (2006) findings that 9% and 17% of their studies’ respective participants began home education in response to children’s ‘unmet learning needs’ at school. However, my data appear to be in keeping with more recent official and media reports linking the growth in home education figures to schools’ difficulties in meeting children’s identified needs (e.g., Ofsted, 2019; Hepburn, 2018).

Responses to the first two survey and interview questions underpin the first part of my research question: *What circumstances inform the transitions of families to*
home education? Participants described their circumstance related to transitions: a planned transition to formal education, and a later, largely unexpected, transition to home education. Children of 86% of survey participants (n=80) and all the case study families had been enrolled in or had originally been expected to attend school. Given expectations such as Minnie’s, who felt ‘conditioned’ regarding her children’s school attendance, positive parent memories of school, and family house moves into chosen school catchment areas as detailed in Chapter 4, it is perhaps reasonable to speculate that the majority of participants intended their children to remain in school throughout the period of compulsory education.

Forty-eight survey responses (66% of those whose children had attended school) described children’s unhappiness as a catalyst to beginning home education. Whereas Bilton et al. (2018) indicated, in their study, that parents and teachers focused together on children’s academic results, in my survey, 15 participants (21% of those whose children had attended school) said their concerns over children’s school-measured progress led to deregistration. Most parents prioritised children’s happiness at school over attainment. Almost half of respondents (n=46) also described seeking or obtaining cognitive or neurodevelopmental assessments in their efforts to understand and resolve children’s difficulties. As stated, these reported diagnoses are shown in Appendix 8 (Figure 36). Difficulties at the local authority level, or sometimes even persuading schools to refer children to diagnostic services added to family distress at times, and also meant that diagnostic assessments could be accessed only by those able, or willing, to pay privately. Frustration was evident in participant responses related to a gap between the expectations created by policy of, for example, ‘participation of children and young people and parents at individual and

---

38 Case study family 1, Section 5.1
strategic levels’, ‘high aspirations and improving outcomes’, ‘a graduated approach to identifying and supporting’ (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.14), and their experienced reality of schools and services as described in Chapters 4 and 5.

Beyond any formally diagnosed conditions or needs, many parents reported children’s distress (44%, n=32), bullying (29%, n=21) and concerns for their mental and/or physical health (36%, n=27) as primary reasons for deregistration from school. Of the children with reported diagnoses, 49% (n=30) were described as experiencing anxiety related to school, and 28% (n=17) were said to have been bullied, including, at times, by adults at school. The reported overlap of bullying with diagnoses is shown in Appendix 8 (Figure 38). All the parents whose children had attended school stated that their learning needs had not been adequately supported. These parents’ disillusionment with the school system was evident.

Their open dissatisfaction with school, a ubiquitous and established system in modern society, seems to have placed some parents in my study at a social disadvantage, such as when Jack found that long-term friendships ended after she removed her children from school.39 Turner (1974, p.38) described a first stage of ‘social drama’ as a ‘breach of regular, norm-governed social relations’. Parents, in Turner’s view might ‘act [...] on behalf of other parties [...] as a representative’ of their children (1974, p.38). However, parents’ actions on behalf of their children may be seen by those in the education system as ‘dissidence’ that may ‘flout [...] a norm’ (Turner, 1974, p.38). It is possible that parents such as Minnie,40 who had not liked school and Jack,39 who had been bullied, as well as the nine survey respondents who reported their own unhappiness at school, later drew on their

39 Case study family 2, Section 5.2
40 Case study family 1, Section 5.1
own negative experience as school outsiders. This may have impacted on their relationships with their children’s schools, or their decisions to deregister, or both.

Participants reported negative reactions to their efforts on behalf of their children from those in authority. Examples include the responses of headteachers to parents seen from p.103 in Chapter 4. Turner (1974, pp.38-39) explains that, whilst a ‘breach’ is possible to repair, if this does not happen quickly, it is likely to quickly escalate into a ‘crisis’ that ‘cannot be ignored or wished away’, the second stage in Turner’s ‘social drama’. Turner’s ‘breach’ can perhaps be likened to a wedge, driven between society’s norms and some players, such as my participants. At the outset, this ‘wedge’ may manifest as, or result from, miscommunication or disappointed parental expectations, resulting in discordant relationships. When the source of such discord is not alleviated, the wedge can drive families and schools further apart. Perhaps, given the acknowledged scarcity of resources (e.g., Lyonette, 2018) and institutional confusion related to what the law means and how it should be interpreted (e.g., Nettleton & Friel, 2017), alleviating the discord is beyond the capacity of individual schools.

Once discordant relationships degenerate entirely, crisis appears inevitable. In Turner’s social drama, authority figures are expected to facilitate change that can promote reintegration. Arguably, this function would be provided by, or demanded of those working in education (e.g., DfE, 2011, UNESCO, 2000). In my study, as reported in Chapters 4 and 5, such individuals appeared at times to exacerbate discord and parental liminality. In this way, reintegration becomes unattainable, or even undesirable for certain families.

Some participants described a disconnection when, for example, children remained at school while parents spent ‘hours and weeks researching [home
education] online’ (S17), or the family trialled home education over a school holiday. At this point, they appeared to be opening a door to new educational possibilities. Simultaneously, such parents may delay closing the door on socially expected ‘normal’ school attendance. In this way, families might be seen to be on a threshold between school and home education, with no clear picture of where this will lead. Turner (1969, p.95) described individuals in this position as ‘liminal entities’ who are ‘betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.’ Having found themselves outside social norms, these individuals or groups turn to ‘anti-structures’ for guidance (Turner, 1974, p.46).

6.3 Processes
The accounts provided by parents of their efforts to secure what they feel is the right educational approach for their child at school detail many ongoing difficulties communicating with teachers and schools. The most frequently described problem related to schools or teachers misunderstanding, or even denying children’s needs as reported to them by parents. If parents, campaigning on behalf of their children, are somehow challenging the accepted structure of home-school relationships, where, to a great extent, it is accepted that professionals know and act in children’s best interests, perhaps parallels can be drawn with Turner’s ‘status reversal’ (1969, p.17). This is perhaps more marked, given the perceived superior capability of schools over that of parents in the context of both education and safeguarding described in Chapter 2 (pp.17, 21). At the same time, it is perhaps reasonable to concede that some teachers felt unprepared when it came to supporting what they perceived as children’s complex needs. This can be seen in the response of some parents, such as Rachel, who was expected to find ways

---

41 Section 4.2.5
42 Survey illustration 2, Section 4(b)
to supplement her child’s school-based learning at home, or like Minnie,\textsuperscript{43} to
provide ideas and resources for school to use. The professional embarrassment of
feeling unable to ‘meet [a child’s] needs’ as reported by S11 (p.112) and noted in
the literature (e.g., Norwich et al., 2021) might invoke feelings of inefficacy -
perhaps even inadequacy - and liminality for some teachers, not least given the
expectations of the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) and the Teachers’
Standards (DfE, 2011) discussed in Chapter 2. It may also be difficult for some
teachers who have come to think of their professional position as one where
expertise is both expected and unchallenged (e.g., Vincent, 2017; MacLure &
Walker, 2000).

Maxwell et al. (2018) suggested that breakdowns in communication between
parents and schools might in the future lead to parents’ decisions to deregister.
With regard to my findings, such as those illustrated in Figure 7 (p.108), it can be
speculated that this may already be happening across the UK. Parental
frustrations related to unsatisfactory meetings at school and ignored concerns
reportedly led to conflict and lost trust. Parents often used medical, legal or
psychology-related terminology in their responses, indicating their extensive
reading and research around their children’s difficulties as they perceived them,
perhaps wishing to enhance their communication with professionals on their
children’s behalf. Others described accessing courses or even re-training in their
efforts to support their children. Turner (1969, p.174) considers that such practices
empower the ‘initiand’, as they seek to master the skills and knowledge or even
‘replace structurally’ those authority figures that that previously held them in sway.

Reported parental expectations were that children would remain at school, that
they would be included, and any needs supported, and that school would provide

\textsuperscript{43} Case family 1, Section 5.1
an education and a ‘love of learning’. When this seemed unattainable, the resulting discordant relationships between families and schools might be viewed through a lens of parental disappointment, that certain teachers or schools did not meet expectations, which some parents may have seen as legal obligations. As they navigated what was, after all, for most, an unfamiliar system, some parents described their interactions beyond schools with the wider education system.

Examples were detailed of unsatisfactory, discordant communication with the local authority during the statement of SEN or EHC application process. Others described difficulties accessing neurodevelopmental or mental health services for their children due to long waiting lists or not meeting local criteria. At times, referrals could not be progressed because schools, for their own reasons, seemed unable to support these. Perhaps some discord might be alleviated or avoided if schools’ communication enabled parents to understand their perspective in terms of access to funding and local authority services. Some participants found that certain services were only available if children were attending school full-time, but felt their children needed the support of such services to be able to attend, as in the case study example of Matilda, who ‘didn’t go in [to school] because that support was unavailable, and [so...] they took away the [youth intervention service] support.’

A sense of imposed change was shared by many parents in my study as they answered the first five schedule questions related to the circumstances and processes that led them to consider and begin home education. This was most notable in the responses of interviewees and 86% of survey participants who had initially planned for their children to attend school. Some revealed a progressive

---

44 Sentiment expressed by 25% of participants (n=19), exact words used by S1, 05/02/2019; S59, 04/03/2019; S73, 18/03/2019; S77, 24/03/2019; S81, 13/06/2019
45 Case family 3, Section 5.3
experience albeit potentially including time spent ‘in-between’, on the threshold, of
a decision or series of decisions, in or passing through Turner’s (1969) liminal
space. At times, neither parents nor individual teachers or schools seemed to
control this process. For example, Minnie’s statement, ‘I didn’t bring me here, the
system brought me here’\textsuperscript{46} seems to embody this description of the ‘liminal entity’
as a ‘passenger’:

During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual
subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he [sic] passes through a cultural
realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.
(Turner, 1969, p.94)

For many parents, this ‘liminal phase’ did not apply only to their children’s
education and everyday social interactions, but also to their view of themselves as
working adults and even to their ability to work, if their children were at home.
Some parents discussed difficulties related to fitting work commitments around
their children’s home education, financial pressures and at times the loss or
relinquishing of a career. This process may share some elements of the modern
career application of liminality (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) in the way that
professional role and identity suspensions have no set pattern and do not follow
Turner’s (1969) sequential model. Nevertheless, both models assume
reintegration or resolution. Turner’s ‘liminal entities’ have a way of understanding
their liminality; Ibarra’s and Obodaru’s career-based liminality can be managed by
adults as they progress through their working lives. This, arguably, is amplified for
the parents in my study.

Examples shared throughout Chapters 4 and 5 suggest the school-related liminal
phase might have been triggered by extreme disappointment and erosion of trust
in the education system. This is perhaps even more powerful because parents

\textsuperscript{46} Case family 1, Section 5.2
may initially harbour institutionalised or even idealised expectations for their children’s education. If Turner’s traditional liminal phase would have ended in reintegration - in this case with a return to school - perhaps some breakdown of trust at an individual or systemic level as reported by my study’s participants may have disrupted the liminal process. To explain this requires further extension of the conceptualisations of liminality explored by Ibarra and Obodaru (2016).

Since home education is not standard or, generally, a standardised practice, the ‘liminal’ experience of home educating families, once they find themselves outside the education system, is conceivably even less institutionalised. As seen in Chapter 4 (from p.119), families in my study might experience liminality related to children’s education as well as to parents’ employment status and wider social interactions and reactions. Moreover, such ‘liminal phases’ in school, work or social relationships overlap, and may be totally undefined. Roles, relationships, and identities can appear lost and their reinstatement or transformation entirely uncertain. Feelings of ostracisation described in Section 4.2.5 (p.113) may be exacerbated by tensions and mistrust between home educators and central or local government, the media, or those working in the education system in any capacity as noted in Chapters 1 and 2. This, in turn, might limit families’ willingness or ability to engage with support offered by a local authority following deregistration.

As discussed in Chapter 2 (p.47), whereas Turner (1969) initially developed van Gennep’s (1960) threshold concepts to conceive an ethnographic theory of liminality based on traditional rites of passage, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) suggest that liminality in modern contexts may be more uncertain, less institutionalised despite relating to institutional or organisational settings. Since 82% of my study’s survey respondents and all interviewees had originally planned for their children to
attend school, arguably, their expectations for their children were institutionalised. Turner (1969) suggests that an institutionalised liminal state results from an individual or group undergoing an expected and predictable ‘rite of passage’. In the case of parents whose children are just starting school, such a state might last for a short while, until both parent and child have acclimatised to the new routine, and both adopt their new position in society.

Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) suggest that the current experiences of working adults seeking promotion, or a company move is under-institutionalised. The circumstances and experiences reported by my study’s participants are, contestably, likewise under-institutionalised, perhaps even un-institutionalised. I propose that, when contrasted with families’ predominantly highly institutionalised reported initial expectations of school as discussed in Chapter 4 (p.103) this absence of institutionalisation, in difficult parent-teacher meetings, or if children are unable to attend, and in the immediate post-school period, may serve to magnify and extend parental experience of liminality. My proposed extensions are presented in Appendix 2 (Table 8). From the study data, and in the context of my suggestions to expand liminal theory to encompass both highly institutionalised expectations and presently un-institutionalised experiences, I consider that the ‘liminal’ state parents find themselves in is not in question. However, although strong parallels can be drawn with the experiences described by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1974,1969), this schism differs from a traditional ritual process.

Ritual is an accepted part of expected transition, it is systematic, institutionalised, and often planned. Temporary, defined ‘liminality’ is arguably an integral part of such transitional processes, both in traditional societies and the modern world. The experiences of families finding themselves unable - rather than initially unwilling - to access school-based education seems to bring about a repositioning.
I would suggest this leads to ‘liminality’ at different times and for extended periods, for example, with the initial realisation that a child is struggling at school and associated discordant interactions with teachers and other professionals. Later, this might be exacerbated due to a lack of support for home education, or through continuing and prolonged discord with schools.

Such discord is reported at times to extend to wider society and to create a ‘hostile environment’ that can include local authority or health services as well as public perceptions, and perhaps, at times, even family and friends. A representation of this can be seen in Figure 12. Furthermore, the closed and careful outward face of home education as described by Thomas (1998) and still experienced decades later by some of my study participants may mean that some new or would-be home educators are not aware of the potential for support from experienced home educators. For example, Ramona had ‘never realised before that [home education] was even a possibility’ for her as a single mother with limited funds and said, ‘before you start home educating you can’t always find them because they’re quite secretive’.

*Figure 12 A representation of parental ‘liminality’ (based on Turner, 1969)*

Turner describes how liminal entities might be supported by others who may share or have experience of the space/phase through ‘communitas’ (Turner, 1974). In

---

47 S79, 24/3/19
48 Case family 3, Section 5.3
the organisational career extension, this role may be taken by a mentor, friends, family or by current or potential future colleagues. That other local current home educating families can support new home educators was evident in the experiences reported by survey and interview participants, shown in Figure 8 (p.121) and in the practices described by participants and reported on through Chapters 4 and 5. Turner’s (1969) liminality is mediated by village elders and/or a ‘communitas’ of fellow ‘liminars’; modern employment-related liminality is to some extent at least in the control of those adults affected, with the support of professionals and in the context of organisations and systems. As discussed in Section 6.1.1 above, in my study, authority figures from the school system were not seen to avert the escalation of discord into crisis. At times, parents described the actions, or inaction, of individuals within schools that resulted in discord and led to apparently systemic failure to support the emotional and educational needs of children. This seemed to push families into liminality with no source of guidance or sense of what was to come.

Participants predominantly reported accessing the Internet and using social media platforms for advice and support. This was especially evident in cases where families had yet to establish contact with supportive local home educator groups. Turner (1969) discusses the use of masks in rituals of transition, suggesting that the anonymity of the disguise offers protection to those who would otherwise lack the confidence to participate. The possibility of interacting online with experienced yet remote and unknown others, or with a pseudonym, or of asking questions anonymously in a closed group, might conceivably replace a ‘masking function’ in this case (Turner, 1969, p.172).

As outlined in Section 4.2.3 (p.108), almost three-quarters of the 73 parents whose children attended school (n=53) felt their children’s needs were misunderstood or
denied. Respondents reported meeting failures (29%, n=21), conflict with school (21%, n=15), and their concerns ignored (32%, n=24) and combinations of these (Appendix 7, Figure 35). Participants described concerns related to what they perceived as failure in professional training and practice as described by Kendall and Taylor (2016). For a few this resulted in a complete loss of faith in teachers (12%, n=9). Turner’s concept of ‘status reversal’ through powerlessness to ‘status elevation’ is also evident, and this changing relationship seems brought into focus as parents come to recognise and take on their role as home-based educators and to reflect on their exit from the school system:

If liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs.' (Turner, 1969, p.167)

6.4 Transitions

Some parents resolved to deregister over the course of a school holiday, reporting decisions based on their sense of children’s improved wellbeing at home, or having taken advantage of the school break to test home-based learning. Catalysts for others included instances of children’s extreme distress or failed school meetings. Such participants identified critical moments when their decision to deregister was crystallised; however, for many the process was more prolonged, sometimes anguished. At times, deregistration was, in the parent’s view, the result of long-term difficulties for their child or the realisation that school was not ‘right’ for their child. Such parents reported ‘detailed’ and ‘thorough’ research into home education for ‘weeks’ or ‘months’ before finally deregistering.49 Parents detailed ongoing ‘fighting’ or ‘battles’ and described withdrawing from

---

49 Survey responses quoted in Chapter 4
school because of the impact on both children and entire families of prolonged discord with the local authority and/or school.

Home education has been described as a better alternative or the only possibility for some families who feel their children’s needs are not met in schools (Maxwell et al., 2018). Press reports (e.g., Weale, 2019) and posts in social media groups run by and for such parents reveal that parents can feel they have no other option but to begin home education. Certain participants felt strongly that they had been left with no choice, and several railed against the official terminology of ‘Elective Home Education’ – thus masking the actual circumstances of the undertaking. However, whereas some went on to see home education as a positive, transformative experience, others awaited suitable school placement for their child, feeling forgotten and confused, in limbo. Some reported that the decision to home educate was not made by the family at all, even reluctantly, but imposed through exclusion. Perhaps these parents should also be described as ‘passengers’ (Turner, 1969, p.94). Children, whose control over the process is probably even weaker, might therefore be ascribed the same descriptor. Thus, it may be unsurprising, or even expected, that the ‘communitas’ of existing home educators reportedly supported the evolving home education practice of more than half my respondents and interviewees.

The third phase of Turner’s ‘social drama’ is ‘redressive action’. This stage relates to informal and formal ‘mediation or arbitration [...] to resolve certain kinds of crisis or legitimate other modes of resolution’ (Turner, 1974, p.39). Very few participants in my study have successfully navigated through such a phase, which could relate to the potential of schools themselves to offer a solution to families before the ‘liminal phase’ or discordant ‘breach’ degenerates further and becomes an ‘irremediable schism’. ‘Redressive action’, through recognition and support of
children’s needs might enable children to remain in or return to school. An example where such redressive action might have avoided deregistration could be the case of Minnie, who repeatedly asked Hermione’s school to refer her daughter for psychological assessment, and whose application for statutory assessment for a statement of SEN was rejected by the local authority because school had not made the required referrals or implemented evidenced support.

Flexi-schooling offered a way for Abbie to reintegrate Ned into a school environment. Lucy considered that the opportunity to continue flexi-schooling, which was denied the family, might have kept Eve in school. The same might be true for the children of 14 survey respondents who had wanted to trial this practice.

It is perhaps significant that this phase in the ‘social drama’ is expected to be controlled ‘by leading or structurally representative members of the disturbed social system’ (Turner, 1974, p.39). In this traditional view of liminality, for my study’s participants, such ‘actors’ would be the professionals employed by or representing schools and the education system, for example, the headteachers mentioned by many participants, or the various members of the local authority education department introduced at different times in parent reports. However, except for one retired headteacher, and one local authority officer no such ‘leaders’ or ‘representatives’ from the school system were represented as possible sources of support in my parent-supplied data. If then, successful outcomes of parental efforts depend on actions from within the school system - inside ‘the disturbed social system’ - the ‘passenger’ status of parents seems confirmed.

The families in my study may have found themselves in a discordant ‘breach’, where it becomes difficult to participate in the normal social and systemic

---

50 Case family 1, Section 5.1
51 Survey illustration 5, Section 4(b)
52 Parent interview 1, Section 5.4
53 Survey illustration 4, Section 4(b)
54 Case family 2, Section 5.2
processes and structure of school. Turner argues that, without support from representatives of the ‘disturbed social system’ described above, such a ‘breach’, or *discord* in the language of my study, can become a ‘crisis’. At this point, it is perhaps arguable that these families might seek ‘anti-structure’ to make sense of their ‘liminal’ status. Turner considers ‘anti-structure’ to be different or removed from the conventional structure of societal norms, though it is not oppositional per se. Yet, for my participants, such an oppositional stance seems at times almost inevitable.

Turner suggests that ‘communitas’ or ‘social anti-structure’ offers a way for the ‘liminal’ to return to normality or transition between social structures. In this sense, perhaps established home educators, local groups and online social networks all have potential as ‘communitas’, in the way that they are able to support those considering or new to home education to navigate the established systems of education and health from their unfamiliar perspective – to initiate them into an alternative educational arrangement. Thus, those new to home education should be able to transition from conflict to a form of cohesion through a common interest with other, more experienced families in, for example, home education and ‘SEND’ networks.

*Figure 13 Sources of ‘communitas’*
Support through such networks as are shown in Figure 13, then, could mitigate against past or ongoing negative interactions with school or related services. It might lessen the sting of negative public perception, whether this is due to unfamiliarity or other societal bias. Many parents reported their interactions with other home educators helping them gain confidence in their own home education practice.

Turner suggests that ‘initiands’ (p.95, 1969) are indistinguishable from one another. Here, what my study’s participants have in common is their perceived need to provide an education for their children. They may be entirely unique in many other ways, including the diverse routes and combinations of support they draw on as they consider and develop their home education practice. Whereas some participants described their own families as essential support in the process of deregistration from school and beginning home education, others reported family conflict. Overwhelmingly, supportive networks of other parents who had previous experience of similar situations seemed key in helping parents navigate circumstances and transitions they encountered between school deregistration and establishing themselves as home educators. Such ‘communitas’ was reported in local and national groups for home educators, for parents of children with diagnosed conditions or perceived learning needs, and online, in social media groups and forums run by and for the same parents. This is visualised in Appendix 11 (Figure 45).

Common interest, then, may result in a disparate yet supportive ‘anti-structure’ or ‘communitas’. Turner does not consider ‘anti-structure’ to be negative, rather, it is unbounded. This allows consensus, which, he contends, structure cannot foster; ‘communitas’ is essential to the resolution of conflict and subsequent reintegration:

[T]he coherence of a completed social drama is itself a function of communitas. An incomplete or irresoluble drama would then manifest in the
absence of communitas. [...] Consensus, being spontaneous, rests on communitas, not on structure’ (Turner, 1974, p.50)

If, as suggested in the responses of participants, such ‘communitas’ exists outwith school systems among home educators, yet none is accessible to families from within school systems, the resolution of these ‘social dramas’ might currently only be possible through transition away from that system. Once outside the school system, it seems hard to imagine how past or future decisions related to their children’s schooling might result in the attainment of previously reported school-related expectations. For my data, this is illustrated in Figure 14:

Figure 14 A representation of the stages of social drama leading to transition away from school

Whether or not there is a way for parents to attain Turner’s final phase in the ‘social drama’ of ‘reintegration’, in my study, the children of just three participants had successfully returned to school before the age of 16, precisely one-fifth the number who had one or more failed attempts at reintegration (n=15). As was shown in Table 3 (p.118), the majority (n=47) reported no intention of their children returning to school before the end of their compulsory education.

6.5 Practices and ongoing processes

Beginning home education with one child did not always mean that all children in a family were then home educated. Children already at school when home education was begun with a younger sibling were usually reported to continue in the school system. Children who reached school age following an older sibling’s deregistration were most often reported to be home educated. When starting out in home education, some parents described trying to replicate the school day at
home as described by Jack. As noted in my case studies and in previous research (e.g., Thomas, 1998), often, planned learning that was more ‘academic’ took place in the morning. For many, this pattern became less formal as time went on, with time spent at home or further afield, for example, at home education groups, on educational visits or involved in practical tasks and courses, including agricultural and vocational activities.

The majority of participants described the supportive potential of the Internet and activities organised by and for home educator groups. For most, the Internet remained a significant feature of their developing home education practices, though it is important to acknowledge that participation in my survey suggests a good level of digital literacy. Almost a quarter of participants described their use of textbooks, workbooks, worksheets and other print materials of the type that might be used in schools. Outside the home, nearly half of participants described outdoor learning activities, and a similar number listed clubs and societies, with visits such as to libraries, museum, galleries and arts events also considered important by participants, often socially as well as for learning, as evidenced by the ‘planned days out’ activities observed as part of this research. Participant reports and my own observations suggest that, as well as their potential benefit to children, educationally and socially, these events can have significant importance to parents in terms of their support networks and developing practice.

Most participants described the importance to their home education practice and indeed to their family lives of collaborative networks such as those offered online, through home educator groups or friends and family. An erosion of trust in the education system as outlined by participants in Chapter 4 can be argued to trigger or extend discord between families and schools, resulting in Turner’s (1969) ‘crisis’

---

55 Case family 2
and a ‘liminal phase’. In that sense, then, the disparate yet supportive ‘anti-
structure’ of other home educators, groups and social networks can be seen as
‘communitas’.

Turner’s traditional communitas seems to support the newly liminal through the
processes they must undergo to re-join their society. There is a sense of conflict
resolution resulting in reaggregation. Yet, for many of my study’s participants,
liminality may have been a long-term state, or several liminal stages may have
already been passed through. The home education communitas may facilitate the
new family’s transition from school, and certain home educated children may be
reintegrated into school, college, or university at a later date. In fact, my study’s
data suggest that, in the case of many such initially reluctant home educators, the
communitas metaphor might result in transition to confident home education
instead of reintegration into the school system. Turner believed that communitas
might serve to facilitate the reintegration of ‘liminars’ into the normal structure of
society only after such a process had become institutionalised so that ‘a basic
generic bond is recognized beneath all its hierarchical and segmentary differences
and oppositions’ (1974, p.57). It is interesting to consider whether the experiences
of both families and school or local authority staff supporting children’s return to
school-based education following the 2020-21 lockdowns might in the future
underpin such school-based communitas.

For my study’s participants, perhaps the sense of conflict is dissipated or dissolved
rather than resolved. Whereas Turner’s ritual reintegration expected subjects to
return with new knowledge and experience, certain of my study’s participants
appear to have used their acquired skills and confidence to ease the passage of
new ‘liminars’ or indeed ‘passengers’, perhaps in an ever extending and evolving
communitas, as seen in the reported practices of participants including Minnie and Jack.\textsuperscript{56}

To understand reported home education practices and \textit{why} these develop from such processes, it was helpful to take a holistic and relational overview of the data. This included data from the children who had participated directly, and those who had been discussed in such detail by their parents, at the centre of a ‘bioecological system’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1995a; 1995b). The proposed model is shown in Figure 15, below, and recognises the interrelationships of the unique child in ‘microsystems’ with their family and friends through cultural, social and educational activities and clubs reported in Chapters 4 and 5, as well as ‘exosystems’ of wider local and national networks and services, the policies that impact on them. Changes over time (the chronosystem) affect those systems and networks, the individual, who grows and develops, and the family’s evolving home education practice.

\textit{Figure 15 A model for families transitioning to home education (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1995b)}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Chronosystem:} changes over time, including within and between systems \\
\textbf{Macrosystem:} social norms related to education, cultural values and beliefs that may impact home education \\
\textbf{Exosystem:} local authority, national education policies, health and wider services, parents’ work and impacts on - or impacts from - home education \\
\textbf{Mesosystem:} communitas – supportive networks of home educators, local and online connections and communities, links between systems \\
\textbf{Microsystem:} relationships and interactions, \textit{proximal processes} between children and their parents, extended family and friends, (professionals) etc. \\
\textbf{The individual (person):} age, gender, health, individual strengths and needs, impact of, and on, \textit{proximal processes} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{56} Case families 1 & 2, Chapter 5
Initially, in this application of the model, ‘proximal processes’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1995b, p.620) are the increasingly complex relationships between the children in my study and school staff, between parents and schools and between children and their parents as they navigate school-based processes that ultimately seem to fail them. Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000, p.118) consider these negative types of proximal processes that result in ‘dysfunction’. This can explicate the circumstances of families related to the arguably dysfunctional school processes they have endured over time. It also offers a way to understand their evolving home education practice, where children in my data appear better able to learn in an empowered way. In the language of Bronfenbrenner (1995b, p.621), the individual, agentic child is the ‘person’, who acts ‘in and on [their] environment’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1995a, p.634). Recognising the individual agency of children and adults participating and described in my study is important to me ethically, too.

This includes, for example, in activities outside the home such as home educator groups, where children meet other young people and come into contact with adults who run the events, as well as online learning opportunities. In supporting children’s learning, parents and those who facilitate these learning opportunities perform a ‘proximal process’ or ‘transfer of energy’ that results in ‘competence’ (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000, p.118). Parents’ reported expectations for their children, detailed in Chapters 4 and 5, and discussed in Section 6.1.2 above, arguably envisaged such positive relationships and the resulting development of competence at school.

Conceivably, it is the very fact that children’s agency has been limited at school, or that they have been seen as subjects rather than actors, that underlies their school-based difficulties. Examples include teachers told to ‘leave her out of things and she would soon join in’, who were ‘more concerned about the behaviours
rather than the cause’ or who ‘got cross with me when I just didn’t understand’. Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000, p.119) consider this type of relationship to be a ‘proximal process’ that results in ‘dysfunction’. Some time later, in their more secure home education ‘context’, children’s agentic nature appears acknowledged and fostered through their autonomous learning practice, as they ‘direct their own study’. In this way, the data related to children in my study, their reported circumstances related to school, and transitions to and within home education are compatible with the process-person-context-time model as described by Bronfenbrenner (1995b, p.621).

Once a decision to home educate was taken, parents described, to varying extents, the surprise and even disapproval they faced: from those working in schools and school-related services, from the public at large, and even from friends and family. In some cases, as for S71, this dented parental self-confidence. Understandably, this could impact on early practice, such as in reported cases where children were unable to participate in activities beyond the home in the time immediately following deregistration. As well as comprising ‘dysfunctional proximal processes’ impacting on both children and their parents, this might be seen in relation to Bronfenbrenner’s ‘mesosystem’, affecting the way that new home educators interact with potential sources of information and resources. As suggested above, the same can perhaps be said of the negative circumstances, relationships, and processes that families reported experiencing while children were still at school. Arguably, the negative responses of others to their undertaking of home education, as described by some families, stem from the cultural attitudes and societal norms constituting Bronfenbrenner’s ‘macrosystem’.

---

57 Quotes from S2, S4 (05/02/2019) and Hermione, case family 1
58 S25, Section 4.2.6
59 Survey illustration 5, Section 4(b)
By contrast, the facilitative potential of the mesosystem was harnessed by those participants whose family and friends provided supportive proximal processes, or communitas. Dysfunctional proximal processes and mesosystemic interactions experienced at school were replaced with these positive relationships and resulting competence.

It is also possible to explore how parents’ developing home education practice is influenced ‘exosystemically’, for example, by their work, which affects both time available and the family’s financial situation. Other ‘exosystemic’ influences can be seen in participant reports related to varying local authority services for home educators. The ‘exosystem’ includes the context of services and resources families may access as part of their home education practice, including those that are mediated online.

The Internet’s potential to connect individuals with others whose experience, knowledge or skills are most aligned to a child’s – and, depending on the child’s age and stage, the parent’s - current needs, arguably confirms the mesosystemic properties of online connections in this model. Online, parents access information, resources, social media forums and the communitas of other parents with experience of school difficulties, home education and/or a range of children’s diagnosed conditions and additional needs.

6.6 Summary of analysis

This chapter has set out my study’s development of theory to understand and explicate the circumstances and resulting processes, decisions and practices experienced by participants in my research. Metaphors of ‘liminality’ and ‘communitas’ central to ‘stages of social drama’ (Turner, 1974; 1969) have been used to examine these experiences and to begin to consider an alternative
solution. A ‘bioecological systems model’ of home education has been proposed where children are seen as engaged and agentic participants in ‘proximal process[es...]' in either direction or both’ (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p.118).

Finally, I have suggested that Turner’s (1969) ‘communitas’ has parallels with Bronfenbrenner’s (1995a, 1995b) ‘mesosystem’ in this context, with potential, through facilitating successful interaction or ‘proximal processes’ between individuals as well as ‘systems’ or ‘structures’ to ensure children’s education.

Conceivably, a less supportive mesosystem and dysfunctional proximal processes related to school might be responsible for the initial discord leading to families’ first experience of ‘crisis’. In this way, I believe these frameworks serve to answer my research question by offering a complementary analysis of two different aspects of my data, the noticeable stages of the changing relationships between families and the education system as they transition to home education, and the interactions that can inform both these changes and their resulting home education practices.
7. Conclusion

My research has exposed the uncertainty of access to support networks for many parents and schoolchildren in my study. My thesis applied liminal theory to make sense of circumstances faced by parents and children who saw home education as their only remaining option. My analysis extended Turner's stages of social drama to understand the processes that these families both underwent and undertook.

These theories, and Turner's concepts of 'masking', 'communitas' and 'status reversal' offer a way to comprehend the experiences of families who find themselves at the margins of the mainstream education system. Combined with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model, which includes proximal processes and acknowledges children's agency, this can provide a framework for professionals to recognise and respond to the family perspective. My data indicate that some professionals, rather than repairing a breach and overcoming discord to avert a crisis, seemed in fact to contribute towards participants' transition away from, rather than back towards, a societal norm. Instead, the adoption of a framework such as my study's might help those employed in schools guard against families' avoidable feelings of liminality and exclusion, facilitate reintegration, or avoid deregistration altogether.

7.1 Addressing both parts of the research question: What circumstances inform the transitions of families to and within home education?

Regarding transitions into home education, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 6, ambitions related to their children’s planned school attendance coloured the perspectives of parents who felt school-based education was no longer - or not currently - possible. Expectations, which families had considered reasonable, appeared, according to participants, unrealisable, even unrealistic, to schools. My
findings indicate that certain parental assumptions might result from what was seen as the promise of national or local policy. At the same time, actions and reactions of teachers and school leaders reported in my data reflect discussions in Chapter 2, that:

- education and school are considered synonymous;
- the combination of centralised standards, devolved and limited budgets can mean that
  - schools may lose sight of children as individuals, and/or
  - teachers may view children as ‘goods’; and
- the role of parents in their children’s education is expected to be supportive of schooling and deferential to professional knowledge and understandings.

Parent reported experiences, fuelled perhaps by their evaluation of a gap between the intentions of policy and their perception of practice, provide context to discordant relationships. The circumstances, processes and transitions reported by families are summarised in Figure 16.

Figure 16 Summary of parent reported processes (adapted from Turner, 1974)

Turner’s stages of social drama offer a way to analyse and understand the disintegration of relationships between families in my study and schools, and to see where there might be opportunities to address discord, avoid ‘crisis’, promote ‘redressive action’ and enable ‘reintegration’. Liminal theory can explain the how of deregistration and early establishment of home education practices. In my thesis, Turner’s ‘breach’ becomes discord, the first phase in an evolving process.
Complex discordant circumstances initiate liminal processes that can result in a ‘crisis.’ For Turner, this may still be averted.

Unresolved, discord invoked or exacerbated feelings of liminality for children and their parents. Extreme distress on the part of children was reported by two-fifths of participants. Often, these feelings were caused by, or co-occurred with, other difficulties, including what families saw as children’s unmet learning needs. Typically, parents were driven by their children’s deep unhappiness to initiate or extend communication with schools, seeking ‘redressive action’.

As was shown in Figure 14 (Chapter 4), almost three-quarters of school-enrolled participants reported their children’s needs being unsupported and misunderstood, or even denied, at school. These parents discussed insufficiencies and discord in communication, leading to breakdowns in home-school relationships. Although written into policies, my study suggests that partnership can elude teachers and parents. While school meetings are taking place, opportunities must still exist for ‘redressive action.’ Collaborative approaches on the part of teachers, school leaders and those working in local authority education departments could reintegrate children into schools, with the home-school relationship re-establishing a ‘natural order’. Successful reintegration into schools would require ‘communitas’, facilitated by others who have previous experience of discord and redressive action, whether or not crisis was averted.

Close consultation and open, two-way discussions with parents offer teachers and schools the opportunity to limit or avert crisis, and to promote Turner’s envisaged reintegration, shown in Figure 17, below. Resolution at this point might return families to the socially expected ‘natural order’ of school and progress them, as ‘passengers’, to the next stage of their relationship with school, potentially as more
equal partners in their children’s school-based education. Given the expectation by schools that parents will support their children’s learning through a range of school activities, such partnership seems reasonable, even essential.

*Figure 17 A way to remain in or return to school, reflecting Turner’s stages of social drama*

Most parents described time spent researching home education while their children attended school. In such cases, perhaps even at the intended point of deregistration, reintegration might still have been possible, to avoid ‘schism’. Once home education was taken on – conceptually, or actually - participants reported how the ‘communitas’ of families with similar experiences could lend sufficient support, and even courage, to facilitate transition away from the school-based education system. Families’ new way of learning and Turner’s ‘emergence of new scripts’ seem to be crystalised in that, once home education had begun with an older sibling, younger children were likely not to be enrolled at school.

As reported in Chapter 4, responses to the aspect of the question related to transitions within home education were notably nuanced and complex, perhaps due to the increased number of potential ‘actors’ in this stage of the social drama. This is represented in Figure 18:
At the stages of discord and crisis, feelings of liminality were evident and increasing. Parents indicated their desire and intention to reintegrate, arranging and attending meetings at school. When this did not work, they sought information and support from experienced home educating parents. Two-thirds of my participants reported finding this online, perhaps protected by the ‘mask’ of Internet anonymity. The potential of the digital environment for learning, and as a safe space for parents, who may be reluctant to risk public disapproval, to ask questions and seek support, was discussed in Chapters 4 and 6.

In my data, Turner’s ‘new scripts’ can be seen to emerge in Chapter 4, sections 4.2.6 Home education processes, and practices and 4.2.7 Evolving circumstances and resulting practices (from p.119). These are also present in the survey illustrations in Section 4(b) (from p.131), as parents detail their evolving home education networks and practices, and within the ‘Transitions’ sections of each of the family cases presented in Chapter 5. Whereas parents’ reporting of events leading to their undertaking of home education reflect what were often presented as protracted and painful processes, and although parents do detail their evolving home education processes, at times their sharing of practices tends to focus on families’ current habits. Whilst this is unsurprising, it means that this aspect of my data is more akin to a ‘snapshot’. Described adaptations to families learning patterns seem to indicate an apparent tendency amongst some more experienced
home educators to gradually adopt less formal educational practices, as noted on
p.124. The acknowledged heterogeneity of home educators may also account for
the fact that any new scripts will be as individual as the families themselves.
Furthermore, as conceptualised in Table 8, in the current system, the outcomes for
members of families undertaking unplanned home education are unlikely to be
certain. In future, the implementation of some recommendations arising in Section
7.5 (p.210) might in part begin to address this aspect of educational and familial
uncertainty.

Theories of liminality and social drama explicate the processes that participants
reported. Their home education practices, often resulting from such processes,
merit consideration though an additional lens. My thesis has developed a model
based on bioecological systems theory to explain the why of deregistration and
later home education practices, discussed in Chapter 6 (illustrated in Figure 15).
This contrasts with negative microsystemic proximal processes and mesosystemic
dysfunction in school relations reported by my participants (Figure 19 below). The
exosystemic promise of national policy that ‘local authorities must identify […]
children […] who have or may have SEN’ (DfE/DoH, 2015, p.23, emphasis in
original), combined with the tensions of neoliberalism faced by schools and
discussed in Chapter 2, can only exacerbate mesosystemic dysfunction.

Represented in Figure 19, below, disappointed expectations were not confined to
parents in my study. Despite requirements for teachers to ‘establish a safe and
stimulating environment […] rooted in mutual respect’ (DfE, 2011, p.10),
participant children described them as reprimanding, unavailable and ‘unfair’.
Instead, by acknowledging children’s agency, educators and school leaders might
consciously develop their interactions with students and their families in a
supportive microsystem. Notwithstanding insufficiencies at a local or national level,
individual professionals and schools have the potential to form a mesosystemic bridge between families and services.

**Figure 19 A representation of dysfunctional systems and proximal processes (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1995b)**

| **Chronosystem:** | changes over time, including within and between systems |
| **Macrosystem:** | social norms related to education, cultural values and beliefs that may relate to education |
| **Exosystem:** | local authority, national education policies, health and wider services, parents’ work (impacts on or from education) |
| **Missing or dysfunctional mesosystem:** | absence of supportive interactions between systems on behalf of children and families |
| **Microsystem:** | relationships and interactions, *negative proximal processes* between children-teachers/schools-parents-children producing *dysfunction* |
| **The individual (person):** | age, gender, health, individual strengths and needs, impact of, and on, proximal processes |

Limited school resources, and restricted access to local authority services for assessment and support of children’s needs, may underlie many of the circumstances reported by my participants. As discussed, national policies require co-production and thereby acknowledge the value of collaboration with parents. However, schools and education departments do not routinely consult with or employ groups and individuals who have experience of school-based difficulties and/or home education. As noted in Section 2.1.4, where such groups have participated, for example, in national reviews, even when presented in reports, their voices are often lost in resulting policy decisions or subsequent media analysis.

My thesis has revealed the mesosystemic properties of communitas in the contexts of the Internet and of those groups and individuals who ease the transition of parents new to home educating. If, as suggested above, schools and
teachers were to provide such support through positive proximal processes in their interactions with children and parents - as policy envisages, indeed requires - the model might instead be represented as seen in Figure 20:

*Figure 20 A model for parent-school collaboration (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1995b)*

| **Chronosystem** | changes over time, to individuals and organisations, and within and between systems |
| **Macrosystem** | social norms related to inclusive education, cultural values and beliefs that may relate to inclusion |
| **Exosystem** | local and national frameworks related to equality and inclusion in education, health and wider services, inclusive practices adopted by parents’ employers |
| **Mesosystem** | *communitas* – school's supportive interactions between systems on behalf of children and families |
| **Microsystem** | relationships and interactions, *positive proximal processes* between children-teachers-schools-parents-children producing *competence* |
| **The individual (person)** | age, gender, health, individual strengths and needs, impact of, and on, proximal processes |

7.2 Strengths and limitations

I believe my study to be the first to examine the experiences of UK-wide families who had, in the main, intended school attendance. In total, 98 families described the home education of 149 children across England, Scotland and Wales, made possible by an online survey. This element of my research design was retained through negotiation and against original University advice, to only employ case study. The depth and richness of survey responses to collaboratively designed questions was hoped for but went beyond my expectations. Parents seemed to engage candidly and emphatically in a survey whose open questions focused on their experiences and educational practices. Whilst the survey may provide a snapshot of families’ recollections, my participants’ detailed, reflective recounts in response to the open-ended questions give a sense of the dynamic nature of their circumstances.
For the case studies, my professional experience helped me to forge relationships quickly with children and their parents, which facilitated the gathering of background information. This was invaluable to me when conducting interviews, as were the observation techniques I had developed in schools. Skills established as a teacher enabled me to include children and their responses confidently and respectfully in my research. My teaching experience was thus a significant factor in my approach to the design of the research and the ethical, careful gathering, analysis and reporting of data.

Distribution predominantly through social media channels appeared to account for the survey's success, though this will doubtless have skewed responses. Parents who lacked sufficient confidence online, or who found the open questions daunting, would be unlikely to contribute, and those without easy access to the Internet or suitable devices could not have participated. Respondents have self-selected, and certain home educators, with alternative experiences and personal, cultural or religious perspectives, may not have chosen - or been able - to access the survey, which was only available in English. Acknowledging past difficulties described by many participants, it is likely that some families would have little time, or emotional capacity, to engage with a questionnaire.

Data include parents’ recollections of what may have been, or still be, unsettling, upsetting circumstances. Recognising that such memories are participants’ perceptions of a reality that was clearly distressing for them at times, I have sought to be objective in my reporting and analysis. Similarities between survey responses, and between survey responses and interview participation, where I was able to ask follow-on questions, indicate that my findings are robust and reliable.
COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown limited my recruitment of additional participants and curtailed planned research activities with children in particular. Potential participants dropped out due to their preference for Zoom as a platform to conduct the interview, which was not permissible under the University’s ethical conditions. Finally, unintentionally, face-to-face participation with children was limited to girls, and survey participation related more to boys. Whilst unknowable, the potential effect of this on the resulting data should be acknowledged.

7.3 Further research

To build on my thesis and the body of research related to home education and to inclusion, future studies could include:

The perspectives of schools and teachers
• Researching professionals’ work-related experience of the processes leading up to deregistration, has the potential to confirm the staged processes from a school perspective. Additional insight from such a study might begin to support the requirements for ‘reintegration’ as discussed in Chapter 6. Given time pressure experienced by many teachers and discussed in Chapter 2, a survey would likely be the most convenient way for professionals to participate.

The perspectives of fathers regarding apparent discord and insufficiencies
• As discussed in Chapter 2, home education research often focuses on maternal views. This is likely because home educators are, predominantly, mothers. However, this does not fully account for the gendered bias in studies of home-school relations, or of parenting children with unmet needs. Such a focus could also build on extensive work begun by the Fatherhood Institute during the first COVID-19 lockdown, mentioned in Section 2.2.

Greater direct participation of children and young people
• Interviews and case studies would enable a fuller understanding of the perceptions of children and young people of their classroom experiences. As in previous research, including my own, recruitment could be the most challenging aspect, and would need to be carefully negotiated and safeguarded through trusted gatekeepers. This would stand to powerfully
inform practitioners and settings interested in facilitating redressive action and reintegration, indeed, in preventing discord and crisis.

7.4 Personal and professional development

I began to write my proposal for the OU EdD programme fuelled by outrage at what I saw as the plight of children who seemed to me to be excluded from school-based education, despite the laws and policies that should serve those very individuals. Despite two periods out of school myself as a child, I had no personal home education connections. In my professional role I had met, in person, less than a dozen home educating families. In my naïveté, I assumed an answer could be found so that, in future, all children would be educated inclusively in schools. At least, I hoped, my study could bring to light the experiences of some families and children for whom the UK school system appeared not to be working. As I researched to develop my proposal, I found that these experiences were both more widespread and more well recognised than I had imagined. Moreover, my ambition to ‘shine a light’ was, rightly, thwarted, when, before I had been accepted onto the EdD programme, the news media began to report on these inequalities.

As an educator, I have learned a great deal from home educating parents and their children. I had believed myself to see learning as something that happens anywhere and anytime. I now recognise that my initial perspective was not as broad as I had imagined and remained framed in institutional views of what constitutes education. In this sense, undertaking doctoral study has professionalised my fury. In my practice, I now expect, even demand, more conclusive evidence, as well as justice.

In terms of my development as a researcher, I continue to seek equilibrium between discussing what is right and reporting what is true. I have been surprised by the messiness at times of my research process, despite always aiming for order
and clarity. At the centre of this, though, I strive for objectivity, and truth, which, if it is possible, must be the purpose of research.

7.5 Recommendations arising

My thesis highlights five recommendations. Whilst their aims derive entirely from my survey and interview responses, like the development of my schedule of questions, these have been shared with four home educators, including one case study participant and two parents who had collaborated on the questions, prior to inclusion in the thesis. This was to obtain feedback on their perceived relevance from people with lived experience of circumstances, transitions, processes and resulting practices in common with my study’s participants.

1 Specific, mandatory training for teachers on special educational needs, inclusive practice and working in genuine partnership with families should be a requirement for ITT and schools’ INSET, as it is for Safeguarding.
   • Such provision would not require any changes to law or policy.

2 Permitting pupils to flexi-school should not impact schools’ attendance figures or funding formulae.
   • This could enable some children to remain in, or return to, school.

3 The home education advisor role could be developed and carried out by an inclusive educator with experience of alternative education. Such a conciliatory position might be undertaken by a consulting parent with similar experience, a senior staff member with pastoral responsibilities or a local authority officer with understanding of county- or borough-wide services who might facilitate necessary referrals.
   • This individual could also speak at schools, and/or arrange for home educators to share their experiences and practices with teachers.

4 Voluntary registration of home educated children should provide access to local authority education resources, including assessment and support services, access arrangements, external examination centres and the cost of assessment for national qualifications such as GCSEs.

5 Dropping the word ‘elective’ from government terminology would include all home educating families and demonstrate respect for their practice.
Based on my findings and analysis (Chapters 4 to 6), sufficient training and support for teachers to develop skills as inclusive practitioners and in their parent communication (Recommendation no.1 above) might avert discord and liminality in the first place. Despite its call for teachers to instruct inclusively and explicitly, the ITT Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019c) does not address this in sufficient depth. The implementation of Recommendation no.3, to ensure expertise and an informed and co-productive approach, could enable children’s successful reintegration into schools, should families wish to trial this and, in future, perhaps avoid crisis altogether for some families, as suggested in 7.1 above.

Beyond these practical recommendations, the theoretical frameworks applied in my thesis have potential to offer practitioners and policy makers a lens to better understand family circumstances and processes, including how to recognise when liminality may result from discord. In this way, support - positive proximal processes facilitated by teachers and schools - may offer a form of communitas to parents as they navigate unfamiliar, complex systems related to education and inclusion.
References


Department for Education (DfE) (2019a) Elective home education: departmental guidance for local authorities [Online]. Available at


Department for Education (DfE) (2011) Teachers’ Standards: effective from 1 September 2012 (Updated June 2013). London: Department for Education.


Kendall, L. & Taylor E. (2016) ‘We can't make him fit into the system': parental reflections on the reasons why home education is the only option for their child who has special educational needs, Education 3-13, 44(3), pp.297-310. DOI:10.1080/03004279.2014.974647 (Accessed 23 November 2017).


Norwich, B. (2016) Conceptualizing special educational needs using a biopsychosocial model in England: the prospects and challenges of using the International Classification of


The Economist (2021) Kitchen-table classrooms - COVID-19 has persuaded some parents that home-schooling is better, The Economist, 22 February [Online]. Available at:


Weaver, L. (2020) ‘Searching for an answer to make it all better’ A grounded theory study exploring parental drive for diagnosis; is it really autism, or a misinterpretation of behaviour? Unpublished doctoral thesis, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and University of Essex.


Appendices

Appendix 1: Early literature reviewing

Figure 21 Early sorting of sources

Figure 22 Notes from early reading
## Appendix 2: Conceptualisations of liminality

**Table 8 Conceptualisation of liminality, work extensions, family experiences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turner's conceptualisations (as presented by Ibarra &amp; Obodaru, 2016)</th>
<th>Present day extensions within organisations (Ibarra &amp; Obodaru, 2016)</th>
<th>Extensions related to participants undertaking unplanned home education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simultaneous role and identity suspension</td>
<td>Uncoupled or sequential role and identity suspension</td>
<td>Identity suspension on multiple organisational levels: school, health/social care, family, work, society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finite, bracketed time period</td>
<td>Open-ended, extended time period</td>
<td>Unknowable time period, perhaps exacerbated by unknown or unknowable factors with potential for reintegration or permanent schism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly institutionalised ritual guided by elders; a built-in communitas of fellow liminars</td>
<td>Self-guided process, self-made communitas</td>
<td>Process may not be guided at all, initially; communitas may not be expected or easily found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially legitimate narrative</td>
<td>Incomplete, and/or culturally problematic narrative, emergence of new scripts</td>
<td>Narrative can be socially and culturally isolating; scripts may emerge only retrospectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obligatory nature: the liminar had no choice but to undergo liminality</td>
<td>Voluntary nature: the liminar can choose to initiate liminality</td>
<td>Involuntary nature: the liminar may not anticipate or control events that trigger liminality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome is always certain. Only one outcome is possible: Person assumes the next status in the ‘natural order’</td>
<td>Outcome can be uncertain. Multiple outcomes possible: progressive change, regressive change or unresolved stasis</td>
<td>Outcome is highly unlikely to be certain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Survey with collaboratively drafted questions

As the survey print-out from JISC extends to 20 pages, the survey is presented in the following formats:

- The landing page is shown as a screenshot to illustrate the participant view;
- The information section is presented to fit on a single page;
- The consent section is shown in its entirety
- The questions have been added as text. Each had its own page and text box online.

*Figure 23 Survey ‘landing page’*
Figure 24 Survey information (contacts cropped)

Information

This survey forms part of research for my Doctorate in Education at the Open University.

I am Sarah Gillie, and you can contact me by email with any questions related to the study on sarah.gillie@open.ac.uk.

My research supervisors are Roger Hancock (roger.hancock@open.ac.uk) and Kimberly Safford (kimberly.safford@open.ac.uk).

Thank you for taking time to look at the information, consent form and survey.

What is the aim of this research?

I am asking for your views for important research about families’ experiences of home education when one or more children’s need have been unmet or were expected not to be met at school. This study aims to deepen our understanding of the experiences, practices and plans of families home educating to meet children's individual needs, including (where relevant) any past or future time in a school setting.

This study has been approved by the OU Human Research Ethics Committee - HREC reference number: HREC/3030/Gillie http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/

What is involved?

The study is looking at the experiences of families who home educate. Your views will contribute to new research that aims to improve understanding and services. Research participation today involves responding to survey questions via a web browser. Following consent, there are 10 optional open questions, plus an additional question related to your statistical information. You may answer as many or as few as you wish, in as much or as little detail as you wish.

Is it confidential?

Yes, the survey is anonymous and responses cannot be linked to you. I will write a report of the study but no individual will be identifiable from the published results of the research.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation in the study is voluntary and you are not obliged to answer any questions you do not wish to. Even if you choose to take part, you are free to withdraw at any point up to submission of the survey and your responses will be deleted.

What happens now?

If you would like information about participation in a follow-up case study, or to receive updates on the study, please contact me via email: sarah.gillie@open.ac.uk

What if I have other questions?

If you have any other questions, I would be happy to answer them. Please contact
Figure 25 Survey consent

Consent

Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the information on page 2 of this survey outlining the nature of the study, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study by email if I wanted to and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time up until the questionnaire is submitted, without having to give a reason.

I understand that participation will involve completing survey questions online.

I understand that information I provide will contribute to new research that aims to improve understanding and services for children and young people and their families with special or additional needs who are currently involved in education at home or who may be considering home education.

I understand that no personal information will be collected that can identify me.

Use of information in the study

I understand that information I provide will be anonymised and used for the purpose of the EdD study and possible future publication, including the sharing of findings with participants and the wider community, such as through conference presentations, journal articles, book or book chapter, or the annual research update email which I may choose to receive.

I give permission for information from participation to be deposited in a specialist data centre after it has been anonymised, so it can be used for future research and learning. I understand that my survey responses will remain anonymous and unable to be linked to me in any way.

Clicking yes below will confirm that you have read and understood all of the above, and that you agree to take part in the survey. *Required

- Yes
- No
Figure 26 Survey questions

1. What did you anticipate about your child/children’s education before they reached school age? Feel free to include any plans, ideas or dreams.

2. What circumstances led you to home educate? Please describe the decision-making process.

3. What happened once a decision to home educate was made?

4. Please share anything else you would like to about your child/children’s school experience, if applicable.

5. How has the experience of choosing to home educate your child/children changed your life and theirs? This may include e.g. work or relationships within or beyond the family.

6. What information and/or support does your local authority provide about home education?
   a. How easy is this to access?
   b. How could it be improved?

7. What, if anything, would make home education easier for you and your child?

8. What is a ‘typical’ day?
   a. Please share anything you would like to about how your child/children learn(s) at home and/or in the community.
      i. What networks do you use for home education?
      ii. What kinds of resources and expertise do you access?
      iii. How often?

9. How do you know that home education is the best option for your child/ren?
   a. How would you describe an ideal educational environment for your child/children?
   b. Is there anything you or your child/ren miss about school?

10. Have you or your child/ren considered or trialled (a return to) school? If so, what happened?
   a. Please share anything you would like to about your child/ren’s and your plans and aspirations for their future education at home, school, further or higher education. Are these dependent on provision of additional financial or practical support, through e.g. DLA or EHCP/Statement (Wales)?
   b. How would you describe an ideal educational environment for your chid/ren?
Appendix 4: Children’s information leaflet example

Figure 27 Children’s information sheet example

Research study
Information leaflet
Special or additional needs and home education: an investigation

20/10/2018

Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies
Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology
Sarah Gillie, EdD researcher
E: sarah.gillie@open.ac.uk
T: 07815 136621

Supervisors:
Roger Hancock
E: roger.hancock@open.ac.uk
Kimberly Safford
E: kimberly.safford@open.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed by, and received a favourable opinion, from the OU Human Research Ethics Committee - reference number: HREC/3030/GILLIE

What is the research about?
I would like to find out what you think about learning at home and learning at school.

What will happen if I join in the research?
I will join your family for a trip out. I will ask you to talk to me about your learning. We will make a drawing called a concept map together — this is a drawing that shows your ideas. I will also make a recording of our conversation so that I do not forget anything.

Do I have to take part?
No. Even if you say yes, you can decide to stop at any time. Your recording will be deleted and I will give you your concept map drawing. I will not keep any information about you if you decide to stop. You can change your mind up to 31st January 2019.

Is it confidential?
Yes. Everything you tell me will be private. I will ask you to choose a different name, so that when I write about what I find out from you, no one else will know it was you. I will scan the form that you sign to keep it safe and shred the paper copy.

Keeping safe
If you tell me something that makes me worry that you are not safe, we will stop straight away. I must follow rules to keep you safe, and there are people I should tell if I am worried about you.
Appendix 5: Parent consent form example

Figure 28 Parent consent form example

Informed consent for research study: Parent participant
Special or additional learning needs and home education: an investigation

Sarah Gillie, researcher for doctorate in education, sarah.gillie@open.ac.uk
Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology.

Please tick the appropriate boxes  Yes  No

1. Taking part in the study
I have read and understood the study information dated 18/10/2018, or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time up until data have been anonymised on 31/01/2019, without having to give a reason, by contacting the researcher, and all of my information will be returned.

I understand that taking part in the study involves the researcher spending time with my family, interviewing and observing, with a follow up visit to approve and amend interview transcripts and other information related to our participation in the research.

I agree to the interviews and observations being audio recorded for transcription.

2. Use of the information in the study
I understand that my data will be stored electronically or in paper form until the researcher’s EdD is complete (2022). Data will be anonymised once it has been approved by the participant and original materials will be destroyed.

I understand that information I provide will be used for the purpose of the study and possible future publication, including the sharing of findings with participants and the wider community, such as through conference presentations, journal articles, book or book chapter, or the annual research update email which I may choose to receive. I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team.

3. Future use and reuse of the information by others
I give permission for the transcripts and observation information from participation to be deposited in a specialist data centre after it has been anonymised, so it can be used for future research and learning. I understand that such anonymised data will be stored securely until 10 years after the end of the study (2032).

4. Signatures

_____________________________  ____________________________  ________________
Name of participant [IN CAPITALS]  Signature  Date

This study has been reviewed by, and received a favourable opinion, from the OU Human Research Ethics Committee - HREC reference number: HREC/3030/GILLIE

http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/
Appendix 6: Concept map examples

Figure 29 Concept map by Matilda 28/11/2019
(Created by Matilda following our interview, while I interviewed her mother)

Figure 30 Concept map for Eve, 20/2/2020
(Concept map created from recording and transcript and shared for participant-checking)
Appendix 7: Figures related to demographic data

Figure 31 Reported organisation of home education

- Mother 68%
- Mother and tutors or family members 7%
- Tutor/s 1%
- Mother and father 17%
- Father 3%
- Family together 2%
- Children - entirely autonomously 2%
- Nonbinary parent 1%

Figure 32 Participant reported ethnicity

- White British 79%
- White Scottish 11%
- Other White background 5%
- Other Mixed background 1%
- Chinese 1%
- Other White and Black Caribbean 1%
- Mixed-White 1%
- Other (White Cornish) 1%
- White Irish 1%
Figure 33 Parent reported highest level of formal education

- Undergraduate study 37%
- Postgraduate study 25%
- Secondary education 20%
- Professional qualifications 11%
- Doctoral study 7%

Figure 34 Reported gender and sibling education

- One son educated at home 23%
- One daughter educated at home 16%
- Two or more sons educated at home 20%
- Two or more daughters educated at home 12%
- Two or more children educated at home (both genders) 16%
- One child educated at home (gender not specified) 3%
- More than one child educated at home (gender not specified) 10%
Figure 35 Overlapping parental experiences

Needs reported denied/misunderstood

- Two of the additional listed experiences: 32%
- Three or more additional listed experiences: 17%
- Meeting failures: 11%
- Concerns ignored: 11%
- Conflict: 8%
- Loss of trust: 4%
- No additional detail reported: 8%
- Child "falling behind": 9%
Appendix 8: Children’s reported diagnoses

Figure 36 Children’s reported needs

Where parents used diagnostic terminology, anxiety and autistic spectrum condition (ASC) were the most frequently reported conditions, at 49% (n=30) and 43% (n=26) respectively. Dyslexia was next most reported (25%, n=15), with two instance of co-occurring ASC and one of ADHD. Of the participants who reported a diagnosis for their child of ADHD (13%, n=8), 7 also reported a diagnosis of ASC, and two described 'complex needs'. 13% (n=8) of participants who provided this type of information described their children's difficulties with motor-coordination, with 5 parents describing developmental coordination disorder (DCD/dyspraxia) and two instance of dysgraphia co-occurring with dyslexia.

Sensory difficulties were described by 8% of participants (n=5), with one reported diagnosis of sensory integration disorder and four of sensory processing disorder; only one of these did not report co-occurring ASC. 12% of participants (n=7) described their children's access to and support from occupational therapy services but did not detail motor or sensory difficulties; 3 reported co-occurring ASC and 2 reported dyslexia. Children’s speech, communication and language needs were reported by 16% of respondents (n=10), including co-occurring with ASC (n=4) and dyslexia (n=2). Hearing loss or auditory processing difficulties were listed by 7% of including co-occurring with ASC twice and dyslexia once. Chronic illness was reported by 3% of participants (n=2). Over half of the 26 participants reporting a diagnosis of ASC (n=14) detailed at least one co-occurring condition. Of the 30 participants reporting anxiety, almost two thirds (n= 19) reported co-occurring conditions, with 9 instances of ASC.
Of the 15 participants who discussed their child's EHC plan or statement of SEN, 13% (n=2) were parents of children with chronic illness, both of whom were flexi-schooled. 60% (n=9) detailed needs related to anxiety; 2 cases reported anxiety as the primary difficulty, others described anxiety as relating to 'unmet SEN'. 40% (n=6) reported a diagnosis of ASC, 5 with diagnoses of co-occurring conditions. ADHD or 'complex needs' were both reported by 27% of participant parents (n=4) of children with EHC plans; all except one described co-occurring conditions. 20% (n=3) reported co-occurring SCLN and 7% (n=1) reported co-occurring DCD.

---

**Figure 38 Reported bullying and primary diagnosis**

![Bar chart showing reported bullying and primary diagnosis](image)

---

60 ADHD  Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder  
APD  Auditory processing disorder  
ASC  Autistic spectrum condition  
DCD  Developmental coordination disorder  
SCLN  Speech, communication and language needs
Appendix 9: Interview notes and early grouping of data

Figure 39 Interview notes 20/11/2018

Figure 40 Interview notes 28/11/2019

Figure 41 Collation of data in early thematic analysis

S3: I think we will be fighting the LA tooth and nail for the rest of her statutory school life and our hope is to relocate and create a social enterprise which allows our daughter (and other young people) to not have to rely on woefully inadequate adult services and uses all of our skills and strengths to show that inclusion is achievable and desirable.

Minnie replying to question of how LA could improve support for HE families: That’s a big one! That’s a bigger question, that is, you see, because then it’s down to trust.

S25: My children have thrived. They have confidence and self-assurance whilst balancing being very caring and non-judgemental. They have broad experience of such a range of subjects that I can’t list. They don’t accept information that is fed to them; they know that there are many options and many ways to source knowledge. They are resourceful, independent, they are interested in life and they have the ability to study or apply themselves to any profession or interest they choose. They have been brought up with freedom of thought.

Jack on previous HE coordinator: Her visits included spending time sitting on the floor with the children, chatting with them about their learning. She would bring second-hand books for them, and developed a relationship with the family based on trust.

S2: Our LA is actually quite good. They provide links to homeschooling websites though are very homeschooling-focused. They don’t have inspections or request reports which helps to build trust with the EHE officer and they have quarterly meetings with the local home education community.

Abbie on Ned: I went in and I saw that and I just thought that was so nice that shows how comfortable he’s got with the other children and he’s comfortable to look at books.

S7: We found tutors to help one to one and to catch up on missed work and boost confidence. Feel lucky to be able to do it to restore child’s confidence but feel sorry for those that aren’t supported and have no other option.
Appendix 10: Analysis and counting

Figure 42 An example of manual counting of survey responses related to children’s needs

Table 9 An example of recorded counting and cross-referencing of children’s reported needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported conditions/needs 61(93)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2, 6, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 18, 21, 24, 29, 40, 47, 54, 55, 56, 58, 64, 70, 73, 82, 88, 92, 93, 94, 96</td>
<td>43% (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7, 18, 21, 40, 58, 73, 82, 92</td>
<td>12% (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditory processing APD</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40, 73 (bilateral hearing loss) 85, 90</td>
<td>7% (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3, 4, 7, 8, 16, 17, 28, 32, 34, 45, 60, 65, 85, 88, 95</td>
<td>23% (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCD/dyspraxia/dysgraphia</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30, 40, 47, 65, 84, 95</td>
<td>10% (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7, 18, 40, 68, 95</td>
<td>7% (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OT mentioned but not counted in motor or sensory</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11, 21, 22, 34, 35, 58</td>
<td>10% (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCN</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5, 22, 34, 40, 58, 66, 87, 93, 95, 96</td>
<td>17% (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, 12, 17, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33, 37, 38, 40, 46, 47, 49, 58, 60, 65, 70, 71, 80, 81, 82, 87, 90, 92, 95</td>
<td>49% (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic illness (flexi-schooling)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20, 61</td>
<td>3% (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Complex SEN/D'</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18, 23, 26, 30, 32, 40, 73, 92</td>
<td>13% (9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 11: Analysis and coding

Figure 43 Initial theme generation from coding

Figure 44 Main themes developed

Figure 45 Participant reported experiences and sources of support
Appendix 12: Links and resources named by participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 10 Links to resources named by participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home education information</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education otherwise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support groups</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Fine in School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discounts for home educators</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PopArt Home Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home education visits and activities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educationista Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online tuition</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Maths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloud Learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FareGos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>InterHigh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Online Schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolsey Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online resources</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC Bitesize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duolingo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khan Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Planet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths Whizz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oaka Books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skoolbo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tigtag (primary science)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twinkl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>