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Home education for children with additional learning needs – a better choice or the only option?

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a study undertaken in Wales on the safeguarding of children educated at home. Findings revealed that just under a third of home educators had children with additional learning needs who were removed from school due to what parents reported as negative experiences. These experiences included the suitability of a school system based upon assessment and attainment for children with additional learning needs and a failure to provide adequate support. The decision to home educate was not taken lightly with parents persevering in attempts to make school work for their children. Similar issues are identified in recent media coverage in England and Wales which has suggested that rises in home education may be due to parents ‘off rolling’ their children because they feel forced out of schools that are unable or unwilling to promote inclusive practices. Findings showed that it was not school-based education that was rejected intrinsically but rather the extent to which schools could meet their child’s needs. In the advent of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 these findings suggest that a more nuanced understanding of education is required where home education, either full-time or combined with school attendance, may be in the best interests of the child.

Keywords: Additional learning needs, home education, inclusion, special education needs

Introduction

The number of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) known to be home educated appears to have increased by 57% in the last five years with a further 1,000 children awaiting a school place in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (BBC, 2017). Dr Adam Boddison, Chief Executive of the National Association of Special Educational Needs (2017) emphasises that whilst home education may be in the best interests of some children, the decision must be based upon the genuine choice of parents as opposed to school inability to meet the child's needs. The National Autistic Society Cymru has raised concerns that some parents feel that they have no other choice than to home educate but feel ill-equipped to do this (BBC, 2017b). In their report, 'Empty Promises: The Crisis in Supporting Children with SEND', the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) highlight the 8% reduction in spend per pupil over the last 10 years in England. Consequently, there have been cuts to teaching and pastoral support, lengthy waiting lists for Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments and when they are produced less than a third of headteachers reported that they accurately met the child's SEND needs (NAHT, 2018). Alongside funding cuts, the accountability and assessment agenda has placed the onus upon schools to evidence academic progress and attainment through published performance league tables and school inspection results. Such measures appear at odds with inclusion and there is growing concern that some schools are 'playing the system' by informally removing, or off rolling, those children who will adversely affect the school's results (Weale, 2018). Speaking at the launch of Ofsted's 2016/17 annual report, Amanda Spielman stated,

what is never acceptable is the exclusion of pupils, either formally or through pressure on parents, where the main goal is to boost school performance...The problem of off-rolling affects many children, but

our local authority SEND reports show that the pupils most at risk are those who have special educational needs or disabilities. Again, I am not saying it is never right to exclude pupils with SEND. But it is a concern that the exclusion of SEND pupils was high in a third of local areas inspected. Almost half of local authorities had poor attendance of pupils with SEND. In the worst cases, we heard from parents who had been asked to keep their children at home because school leaders said that they could not meet their children's needs (Ofsted, 2017)

In a comprehensive study of children missing from education in England, the FTT Education Datalab tracked the 550,000 children who finished secondary education in 2017 (Nye and Thomson, 2018). They found that 22,000 children left state education between Years 7 to 11. This group were more likely to be eligible for free school meals, have SEND and have had lower attainment at primary school (Nye and Thomson, 2018). Excluding those who go on to independent schools, alternative provision, or emigrate this left between 6,000 and 7,700 of children who were unaccounted for,

We remain concerned that in some cases, pupils seen leaving school rolls will have been off-rolled – encouraged off the roll of a mainstream school in an informal exclusion in which the school's best interests have trumped the pupil's (Nye and Thomson, 2018).

According to Boddison (2017), only those schools 'with strong ethical leadership' provide an inclusive educational offer. Four years after the introduction of SEND reforms in England (Children and Families Act 2014), which aimed at providing consistent support and the linking of education, health and social care, some councils have announced further funding cuts to the already limited SEND provision (Special Needs Jungle, 2018). In response to

Bristol City Council's proposal to reduce the SEND budget by 10%, two mothers recently took the council to judicial review in what looks set to be a landmark case. Judge Barry Cotter QC ordered the council to reverse the cuts stating that this was an exercise to 'balance the books' rather than to promote the welfare of children (Yong, 2018). There are currently similar judicial reviews in Hackney and Surrey (Special Needs Jungle, 2018). Rather than offering a simpler and improved system from birth to 25 years, the SEND reforms have been beset with funding difficulties and a focus on performance. Whilst speaking at the launch of the House of Commons Education Committee inquiry into the impact of the SEND reforms, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Chair of the Committee stated that,

The Committee's current inquiry into alternative provision has heard considerable evidence that children with special educational needs are disproportionately excluded from school and over-represented in alternative provision (HC Education Committee, 2018).

The notion of being encouraged to home educate or off roll SEND children has been raised by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ACDS) in their survey of home education (2017) and more recently in their evidence for the review of school exclusions in England where they state that,

increasing numbers of children and young people are slipping under the radar and are missing out on education as a consequence of a number of borderline-improper or actually unlawful strategies such as part-time timetabling, managed moves, encouragement to home school or other types of informal exclusion activity which is not captured in national datasets (ACDS, 2018)

For SEND children, the decision to home educate, or off roll, can be the result of the school's attitudes towards, and willingness to work with parents (Kendall and Taylor, 2016) and/or

their attitudes towards and willingness to work with the child to meet their social, emotional and educational needs, (Kendall and Taylor, 2016; Parsons and Lewis, 2010; Arora, 2006), manage behavioural issues or cater for specific special educational needs, such as those on the autistic spectrum (Kendall and Taylor, 2016; Arora, 2014; Morton, 2010). In these circumstances' parents may feel they have no choice but to off roll whilst others may be encouraged, or coercively de-registered (HC Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2009; Ofsted, 2010; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). Hence, Morton (2010) concludes that the decision to home educate is not taken lightly and is perceived as the 'last resort' after parents have tried, unsuccessfully, to make school work for their children. Arora's (2006) research from one local authority, found that of 12 families, consisting of 17 young people who had been home educated for 18 months, 8 young people had SEND (although none had a statement of SEN) and,

It was only after a period of unhappiness and stress that they reluctantly decided to start home education. Such a decision was usually made in full consultation with their children (Arora, 2006, p.59).

This unhappiness and stress can adversely affect the child's health and well-being resulting in the need for a period of 'de-schooling' before the child can embark upon home education (Kendall and Taylor, 2016; Taylor, Kendall and Forrester, 2011). Whilst there are some parents who actively consider home education long before they remove their child from school, there are a group of parents who do not, preferring their children to attend school provided that their child's individual and changing needs are met (Parsons and Lewis, 2010).

Background

Under current education legislation, children must receive full-time education, either by regular school attendance or otherwise (Education Act, 1996). It is the term ‘or otherwise’ that encapsulates home education. Parents have the duty to provide a suitable education and do not require permission to home educate, do not need to follow a prescribed curriculum nor must the child sit any formal education tests. The parental right to home educate is not, however, absolute (Monk, 2004). Under section 436 of the Education Act 1996, local authorities have a duty to ensure that home education provision is suitable to the child’s age, aptitude and ability, any special educational needs (section 7, Education Act, 1996) and that it equips a child for life within the community in which they live (Department for Children, Schools and Families: DCSF, 2007).

During the HM Government consultation on the draft home education guidelines for England in 2005, difficulties in the relationship between local authorities and home educators emerged, where local authorities were described as school-centric, heavy-handed and seeming to presume home educated children were automatically a safeguarding risk (HC Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2009). Whilst the non-statutory guidance for England called for greater co-operation between local authorities and home educators (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007), the death of seven-year old Kyra Ishaq (Radford, 2010) in 2008 re-ignited interest in the association between safeguarding and home education. The (then) Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) responded by commissioning a review into home education; the Badman review (2009). The review was beset with difficulties from the outset because it was perceived as skewed towards safeguarding and, once published, provoked arguments that it had disregarded evidence to opt for an assumed association between home education and safeguarding (Stafford, 2012). Whilst the report recommended that local authorities provide a

‘menu of support’ (including flexi-schooling, access to ICT, laboratory environments, music and sporting facilities as well as work experience opportunities and access to examinations), the government focused upon mandatory registration and monitoring, including the legal right for local authorities to access homes and to see the child alone, if appropriate. This was perceived as a contravention of parental rights and an attempt by the state to exceed its boundaries (Conroy, 2010). Home educators launched a lobbying campaign, noteworthy for comprising the largest number of petitions to the House of Commons in one day on a single topic (BBC, 2009). It was, however, ultimately the wash-up process preceding the General Election that prevented implementation, with the Children, Schools and Families Bill proceeding without amendments to home education legislation (Stafford, 2012).

Badman’s recommendations for a more supportive approach were further explored in 2012 (HC Education Committee, 2012). This report revealed wide variations in the level and quality of support offered, as some local authorities situated home education in services aimed at problematic children such as attendance or safeguarding. Further, some local authorities discontinued special educational needs provision once children were withdrawn from school for home education. The report emphasised that local authorities should be encouraged to develop a local offer, designed in consultation with home educators and led by staff situated in neutral services such as learning or library services (HC Education Committee, 2012). HM Government rejected the proposal to review the current guidance but called for local authorities to audit their performance, share examples of best practice and make available local offers of support using existing resources. In the same year, the Welsh Government opted to pursue proposals for home education registration and annual inspection in order to receive a home education ‘licence’ (BBC, 2013). Under these proposals, local authority staff would have the right to enter homes and to interview children alone. Failure to

register or adhere to monitoring and inspection would result in the serving of School Attendance Orders where children must attend a designated school. It was argued that such measures were potentially frightening and intimidating for children, damaging to their feelings of safety and security in the home and posing the risk of local authority staff incorrectly attributing opinions to children (New Foundations, 2012). The subsequent lobbying campaign led to the proposals being dropped with more than 550 responses received (BBC, 2013).

More recently the Welsh Education Secretary, Kirsty Williams announced that existing legislation will be used to require that local authorities compile a 'reasonably complete database' of home educators, as well as a package of support including help with exam registrations, an equitable health offer for home educated children and access to Wales' digital learning platform (Welsh Government, 2018). With regard to SEND children, the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 has been introduced to overhaul the system of support where the terms 'special educational needs' and 'learning difficulties and/or disabilities' (LDD) have been replaced with the new term 'additional learning needs' (Welsh Government, 2018b). The Act proposes similar amendments to those in England including increased collaboration between schools, local authorities and parents, where schools must have a robust policy for the identification of children with additional learning needs (ALN), progress monitoring and, where children underperform, demonstrate differentiated teaching practice (Welsh Government, 2018b). Unlike England where parents can apply to the local authority for an EHCPs without school support, in Wales only those children with profound ALNs will apply to the local authority for what they term an 'Individual Development Plan' (IDPs). Most children with ALNs will be assessed by the school.

Whilst not its primary focus, the issues surrounding home education and ALN children emerged from an evidence-based review (Author et al, 2017) commissioned in Wales by the newly created National Independent Safeguarding Board, established under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. The aim of the review was to consider research findings in relation to home education and safeguarding following reviews of high profile child deaths, and specifically Dylan Seabridge an eight-year-old boy who died from scurvy in Pembrokeshire, Wales. Such cases are rare but raise questions as to the appropriateness of current policy and practice surrounding home education. These questions are by no means new. Over more than a decade various publicly commissioned reports have examined the suitability of home education policy and practice (e.g. Badman, 2009; Hopwood, O'Neill, Castro, & Hodgson, 2007; Ofsted, 2010). Against this backdrop, an apparent polarisation has emerged between the State's desire for an enhanced role in establishing home educated children's welfare and home educators opposition to State interference (Stafford, 2012). However, a third group was identified in our findings of families whose children have ALN who would welcome support, if it met their child's needs. In this complex and often fraught area there is remarkably little research examining the views of either home educators themselves or professionals with an interest in home education. This paper explores the views of home educators and a range of professionals on motivations to home educate and home education and welfare considerations.

Method

This paper presents detailed results of key elements of a review carried out in Wales between February and November 2017 (Author et al, 2017). The full review consisted of four main

elements of data collection; a literature review, a child practice and serious case review analysis, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and an online survey for home educators. In addition, a brief summary of current legislation and policy was conducted. Ethical approval was obtained from the [University] School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. This paper presents findings from the interviews and online surveys.

Eighty-two stakeholders were sent an email inviting them to participate in a semi-structured interview. In order to maximise response rates and ensure participation across Wales within the timescales, telephone interviews were conducted. Of the 82, 45 stakeholders participated in the review - 44 were interviewed and one responded via email. This is a 55% response rate. Representatives from all 22 local authorities (LAs) in Wales participated in telephone interviews. A wide variety of professionals responded, including Directors of Education, Service Managers for learning, inclusion, and safeguarding, as well as co-ordinators and Education Welfare Officers. Three of the six Regional Safeguarding Children Boards contributed to the review, as did six of the 11 safeguarding representatives from the Health Board and National Health Services (NHS) Trusts in Wales, as well as representatives from the Welsh Government, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, and (following contact with a home educator from Scotland) the Children's Commissioner for Scotland. Of three home education organisations identified, one issued a written statement for inclusion in the review but none of the 11 support groups responded. Hence, none of the six home educators interviewed were from these support groups. Four were identified through LAs, one through a voluntary group (not specific to home educators) and one volunteered when they heard about the research. The stakeholder interviews are therefore strongly weighted toward other voluntary sector and public service respondents.

An online survey was designed to encourage participation from home educators who may have been reluctant to engage in an interview. This follows research which has consistently found it relatively difficult to access home educators (Rothermel, 2003; Parsons and Lewis, 2010; Nelson, 2014). By using an online survey, the sample was limited to those in contact with home education support groups and/or the LA as well as those with computer access and literacy. The 134 responses to the survey, are therefore useful in providing a range of views on home education and safeguarding issues – and they are a large sample for UK research in this area - but they do not purport to be representative. Of the 134 survey respondents and six home educators interviewed, 38 reported having children with ALN.

Of the 38 home educators most were mothers (95%) and nearly all gave their ethnicity as white (97%). This follows previous findings that home education is most predominant amongst white British mothers (ADCS, 2016; Arora, 2002; Hopwood et al, 2007; Kendall and Taylor, 2016; Morton, 2007; Parsons and Lewis, 2010).

Home educators ranged from those who had been home educating for less than a year (33%) to those who had been home educating for more than seven years (14%). Whilst the majority of families had four children or less (71%) home educators reported having from 1 to 11 children. In total the survey sample represented 125 children in England and Wales. When asked about the age of children, some families who had home educated multiple children over many years opted to provide an age range, e.g. 5 – 40 years rather than specific ages for each child. Hence, analysis has been limited to the 61 children under 16 and whose ages were provided. Children's ages ranged from 5 – 15 years with most children of primary school age (59%) rather than secondary school age (41%). This finding contrasts with research into the

prevalence of home education using LA figures, which found almost twice as many secondary school aged children home educated than primary children (Hopwood et al, 2007).

Findings

Findings are presented in two sections: motivations for home education; and home education and welfare. To aid clarity when reporting findings results are presented from ‘professionals’ and ‘home educators’ regardless of whether they were interviewed or completed the online survey.

Motivations for home education

Most of the home educators had made the decision to home educate on the basis of negative experiences with school. For ALN children, the tailoring of education to the child’s needs emerged as a recurring theme,

[Both children] have a statement of special educational needs, with profound learning difficulties, they did attend school but we were frustrated with the system, the lack of care and progress. The extreme bullying and [school’s] refusal to address difficulties with bullying in unstructured time. So due to their mental health and wellbeing suffering, we withdrew to home educate and have never looked back. Best decision we ever made. They are thriving because they can have an education tailored to their individual needs as opposed to being forced to conform to an educational curriculum that has no meaning, value or purpose to them and their needs (Home educator AE)

Following previous research findings, dissatisfaction with school was based upon the school's attitudes and willingness to work with parents and children to meet the child's social, emotional and educational needs (Arora, 2006; Hopwood et al, 2007; Morton, 2010; Parsons and Lewis, 2010; Rothermel, 2004),

The bullying (from staff as well as pupils), teaching to test (badly), excessive pressure and extreme rules of the school (one school refused to let my son use the toilets despite a medical note from his consultant regarding a lifelong medical condition the school had been aware of prior to my son starting school), all combined to make school a nightmare I was no longer willing to subject my children to (Home educator AH)

Several references were made to the behaviour of school staff, in one case described as 'horrendous' (*Home educator A*), indicating a lack of understanding about how best to support ALN children,

I felt that he received inadequate support and understanding and I witnessed him being shouted at and intimidated by staff. I also felt that he was not kept safe at school as he was able to leave the premises unnoticed. He was given authorised absence by the school in response to a letter from the GP stating that he was suffering with severe anxiety and while he was at home I researched alternative education (Home educator BS)

As the above quote demonstrates, limited understanding and provision exacerbated the child's needs, leading to increasing levels of anxiety. Following previous research (Wray and Thomas, 2013), this could result in school refusal by some children,

My child suffered from anxiety and the school would not work with me and were more concerned with attendance and test results. I was urged by doctors to "do something" about the school. School ignored medical advice. Moved school. He didn't settle (Headteacher said he had lots of "baggage" from previous school experience) but same problems with focus on tests rather than pupil wellbeing. He became a school refuser although he had no apparent difficulty attending social groups outside school (Home educator AK)

Home educator findings support those of Morton (2010) who found that the decision to home educate can be a last resort after a lengthy period of attempting to make school work for their child,

Even with Statementing, we had been let down badly with the educational provision for our eldest two, so we withdrew to home educate so as not to continue battling with schools and LEA (Home educator CF)

In this respect, it was difficult to ascertain the extent to which parents felt pushed into off rolling from those who simply tired of the constant battling to get their child's needs met,

My daughter was diagnosed with [health condition] and her health deteriorated to the point she could no longer attend school. The LA refused home tuition so I had no choice but to home educate (Home educator DP).

Some professionals indicated that LAs had started to record why children were being de-registered amidst claims that some schools were offering this as a solution to families. Although it was made clear that LAs would not tolerate off rolling.

Some parents expressed a preference to access provision such as flexi-schooling which combines part-time school attendance with home education,

My children have been periodically home educated. I would prefer flexible schooling, which is allowed nationally. However, I have been 'told' [the local authority] do not allow this (Home educator AU)

Previous research and governmental reports have posited flexi-schooling as an ideal solution for those who have experienced distress at school, who want to home educate but lack the finances and knowledge to do so (Arora, 2006; Badman, 2009; HC Education Committee, 2012; Kendall, Taylor and Forrester, 2011; Ofsted, 2010; Parsons and Lewis, 2010). In Wales, flexi-schooling is perceived as a short-term measure used to address particular issues and is dependent upon an agreement between the parent and the school (Welsh Government, 2017). However, schools appear reluctant to offer this alternative where approval is at the head teacher's discretion (Arora, 2006).

Several professionals recognised that early support and restorative work was needed to determine motivations for home education, support families and distinguish between those who wished to home educate and those who felt there was no alternative:

there's usually a build up before families decide to home educate, it's rarely out of the blue. For example, bullying which is not dealt with adequately in the parents' view and so, to safeguard their child, they withdraw from school (Welsh Government professional)

In this regard, the role of schools was emphasised in supporting children and resolving issues with families. Some LAs offered examples of inter-agency working aimed at meeting the child's needs - whether through anti-bullying measures, ALN support or liaison with a SEND

Information and Advice Support Service (a statutory service that provides free, accessible and impartial advice and support to families with ALN children) - whilst others exhibited frustration that home education is often tacked onto other roles thus limiting the capacity for intervention. In support of previous findings (Arora, 2006; Parsons and Lewis, 2010), some home educators indicated that they would be willing to re-consider school if their children requested this, provided that the schools did more to meet their child's needs or indeed, once their children had been given time to recover from their negative experiences,

My daughter was home-schooled due to excessive bullying and threats of violence from other school children so I took the choice to home-school her to try and rebuild her confidence and enable her to move past the difficulties This was for 8 months and she eventually returned to an alternative school and is doing well (Home educator DR)

Hence, children often need a period of 'de-schooling' to recover from negative experiences in school (Kendall and Taylor, 2016; Taylor et al, 2011). Some families may benefit from pastoral and emotional support both before and after the decision to home educate has been made (Arora, 2006). Although many home educators did report that once removed from school their children became happier and calmer,

School unable to educate without discrimination based on physical disability. Local authority failing to provide alternative school despite knowing my wishes therefore leaving me no choice but to home educate. I have now discovered I love home educating and believe it is the best way for my daughter to have her medical, physical, emotional, social and educational needs met (Home educator Z)

There was some evidence in support of Rothermel's (2003) assertion that the motivation for home education can change over time. A child may be de-registered due to dissatisfaction with school but as parents discover more about the positive benefits of home education, they may then decide to home educate other children in the family.

Home education and welfare

The vast majority of home educators were against the suggestion that education professionals should become responsible for establishing that the child's welfare needs were being met, and assessing education provision in the home environment,

I believe education, health and welfare are ultimately separate entities, although it's clear they cross combine. I have heard cases of education authorities or health services etc, entering under the guise of education, but using this as an undercover means to assess other areas (Home educator BN)

Such concerns were fuelled by how LA structures address home education, with just more than half the LAs employing education professionals, such as ex-teachers, whilst around a quarter use Education Welfare Officers (EWOs). The use of EWOs was perceived to be inappropriate by home educators as this 'implies that home education is automatically an educational welfare concern' (*Home educator DO*) and where,

EWO are not the people to be dealing with home educators...it should always be in the EOTAS [education otherwise than at school] position...because there are two sets of personalities and job descriptions. EWO are used to dealing with hostile families but their primary goal and objective is always getting kids back on roll...and if you stick home educators in with them

there's a conflict of interest and home educators become an easy target because we're not the hostile and aggressive families that are avoiding schools (Home educator EF)

In contrast, most professionals believed there was a need for oversight of education provision and welfare. This rests upon professional acknowledgement of the LA duty to identify those children not receiving a suitable or efficient education and an apparent assumption that education professionals were having regular contact with home educated children. Whilst nearly all professionals stated that home education was a viable, or even better, alternative to school, with praise for 'some amazing families' (LA8) some professionals added the caveat that this was true when undertaken for 'genuine' reasons (LA21). There were a minority of professionals who endorsed the role of schools,

We will try to encourage to see if we can keep a child in school because as an authority we do believe it's better for children to be integrated in school, socially as well as academically (LA23)

It was observed that some parents may have unrealistic aspirations of their ability to home educate, may undertake it as an avoidance tactic, due to difficulties with school or feel pressurised into home education by their children (LA15). Moreover, professionals felt that even limited engagement, such as submitting the child's work, was a good indicator of whether parents were in fact delivering a suitable education. However, home educators were wary about being judged especially as many deemed professionals to be school centric with limited understanding of both home education pedagogies and ALNs,

The child learns autonomously instead of having to memorize parrot fashion for exams. Special needs children in particular, can be happier at home where

their mental health needs are prioritised over attendance statistics (Home educator BM)

Even those home educators who reported a willingness to engage expressed caution surrounding home visits as,

This would depend on what was required, and how it would affect my son. Due to his mental health needs we follow a very unstructured way of learning which would be difficult to evidence. A stranger coming into his home could have a detrimental effect on him (Home educator BW)

This highlights the need for good relationships between professionals and families yet both home educators and professionals noted a distinction between those LAs who fostered a relationship-based approach and those who adopted a legislative approach. The latter approach was based upon the use of School Attendance Orders that was unhelpful as ‘getting them back into school...well, school is the problem for some’ (LA4). Evidence of a ‘postcode lottery’ is by no means limited to Wales as inconsistencies in practice have been found in England (HC Education Committee, 2012). Situating home education in the Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) team was perceived by home educators as representing a more supportive approach and one in which endorsed home education as a viable alternative to school,

I’m happy to be known as a home educator but I would have concerns if I was forced to evidence how we educate, meet outcomes etc, as this is the system that my child was unable to cope with while in school (Home educator T).

For professionals, the EOTAS team (who are responsible for educational provision for children with a range of needs who are unable to access formal schooling) were ideally placed to provide advice and guidance to families whilst still being trained in safeguarding (LAI8),

We need to see primarily that the LAs role is to provide support, that's what some parents need so we need to find some ways to develop trust between the local authority and families (Children's Commissioner for Wales)

With no formal duties for LAs in regards home education there is no funding provided for support. Indeed, the notion of accepting support received mixed views. This was captured by one respondent who distinguished between 'traditional' and 'modern' home educators, where traditional home educators preferred to live 'off the radar' in remote settings with limited access to society and no State intervention (*Home educator EG*),

They're oldy-worldy, very much more traditional. They don't like TVs and they don't want to subject their children to the media and all the things that are making children more sexually advanced. I find they're very cynical and very cautious, they truly believe the Government is out to get them. I was really, really shocked about how against the Government and the educational world they are. They really truly believe the system is out to get them and I found that quite shocking (Home educator EG).

Conversely, 'modern home educating mums' were open to receiving help from staff who accept home education as a viable alternative to school. These mothers welcomed financial aid to help provide their children with the best education (*Home educator 2*). This was especially pertinent for those who home educated due to school inability to support their children,

I feel that you should get help with funding if your child cannot attend school due to reasons like ASD [autistic spectrum disorder] (Home educator DB)

Discussion

The drive for raised standards in education based upon performance data and attendance rates appears to be discriminating against children with additional learning needs. Whilst this study was not aimed at children with additional learning needs, just under a third of respondents reported that school inability to meet their children's needs led to the decision to home educate. For many, the target-driven, test-based school environment and stringent attendance rates were unsuitable for their children. Following previous findings (Morton, 2010), the decision to home educate was not taken lightly with parents persevering in attempts to make school work for their children. Various comments were made about schools 'not working with' or 'battling' with parents. Yet schools themselves are under pressure. There appears to be no real incentive for schools to offer inclusive practice, either financially or within current performance indicators (NAHT, 2018; Nasen, 2018). Lenehan's review of residential schools and colleges (2017) found that many children with moderate to low difficulties were leaving mainstream education as they felt unwelcome seeking instead alternative placements to improve their well-being. Within this current study both parents and professionals alluded to the existence of off rolling, although it was unclear exactly how many parents felt forced out or encouraged to remove their children from school. What was apparent was the clear distinction between those who felt angry from those who expressed disappointment that their child had had to leave the school, leading them to research other modes of education. Such self-education has been identified as an important part of ALN parents' coping strategies as they seek to empower themselves to advocate for their children (Boshoff et al, 2018). It is

through self-education that parents became alerted to the flexibility of home education and its potential to tailor education to their child's needs. This suggests that parents made an informed decision to remove their children from school and, following Welsh Government (2017) terminology chose to 'electively home educate' their children. However, following previous research (Arora, 2006; Parsons and Lewis, 2010) some home educators indicated a willingness for their children to return to school, provided that the school met their child's needs either on a full or part-time, flexible arrangement. Indeed, those who home educate only temporarily represent the largest group of home educators (Smith and Nelson, 2016). This suggests that it is not school-based education that is rejected intrinsically but rather the manner in which individual schools fail to adopt appropriate inclusion measures (Parsons and Lewis, 2010).

The impending Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (Welsh Government, 2018b) aims to transform the current system by improving the planning and delivery of learner support, offering interventions on a timely basis and placing the learner's voice at the centre. To do this, schools will be expected to conduct their own ALN assessments for children where there are concerns. Education solicitor, Ed Duff has already expressed concerns about the potential for conflict between parents and schools if they cannot agree whether a child has additional learning needs (Special Needs Jungle, 2018) so that these proposals may not prove to be any more successful at resolving disputes than the present system. Indeed, whilst not all the children in our sample had a statement of special needs, many still required additional support. Furthermore, there are some specialist services, such as speech and language therapy, which cannot be provided by home educating parents and will still need to be funded and provided by the LA. On the other hand, Parsons et al (2009) warns about the reach of legislation and policy as some parents either do not recognise

or are unwilling to label their child with ALNs, which is necessary to access the required support.

Further, under the new legislation, schools must still demonstrate progress and attainment for children with ALNs. This places the onus upon schools to provide adequate staff training and financial commitment to inclusive education. Previous research has revealed difficulties in partnership working between teachers and parents, where teachers are often unwilling to learn about ALNs nor to adopt particular strategies for individual children (Kendall and Taylor, 2016). This is particularly pertinent as home educators reported the high levels of anxiety experienced by their children without such provision. The Act does not in itself guarantee any relief in the range of anxieties and pressures that lead to some children being removed from school.

The current study does not purport to offer a representative sample, as it relied upon dissemination through home education groups based upon self-report measures and access to a computer. However, the sample does suggest that some children are being off-rolled because schools are unable to meet the needs of children with ALNs. Where this is a genuine choice, home education offers a flexible approach that can be tailored to meet the child's needs (Boddison, 2017). However, for those who feel forced to off-roll their children, home education requires a significant financial commitment with no funding provided by the State (Kendall and Taylor, 2016). Parents may also lack full understanding of what home education entails, with some confusing it with state-funded home tuition (Burke, 2007). Consequently, Burke warns that these parents having failed in their interactions with schools and LAs, are less able to influence policy, feel forced out of education and lack the support of

organisations and networks. Rather than a system based upon either school or home education, McMenemy (2017, p.11) proposes,

that what is needed is a more nuanced understanding of the nature of just educational arrangements; an approach that acknowledges the value of different types of provision but also recognises that what might suit one child and family might not suit another.

Adopting this stance requires the political will to accept that home education is a viable form of education which is in the best interests of some children. Although the new terminology within the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) 2018 Act seeks to remove the stigma of ‘special’ needs, the broad range of ‘additional learning needs’ negates consideration of the individual needs of each child and the identification of the most suitable form of education provision for each child. Such measures would require acceptance of more creative methods of education, including but not limited to flexi-schooling and the exploration of the teaching and learning methods used by home educators which could be offered within schools.

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