Transition Away from School: A Framework to Support Professional Understandings

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ABSTRACT

The numbers of children with 'special educational needs' deregistering from UK schools to begin home-education has been increasing. This article is based on findings from a survey of 93 families of such children in England, Scotland and Wales conducted as part of a study that investigated the processes leading them to home educate. The research question was: What circumstances inform the transitions of families *to* **and** *within* home-education? Home-education is often portrayed as a rejection of social norms, a perception that can result in parents' feelings of exclusion even when children are no longer enrolled at school.

The research revealed often protracted, cumulative, and frequently traumatic sequences of events pushing families to home educate. The study's framework blends Bronfenbrenner's bioecological system's model with Turner's liminal theory and stages of social drama to analyse these relationships and processes. Staged circumstances reflect aspects of metaphorical ritual, where actors transition to, through and beyond liminality, supported by others with similar experiences.

The study's original framework provides a lens for educators to consider families' experiences. This can support them to meet existing institutional, professional and ethical responsibilities. As well as its potential to scaffold practice for individual educators, children and families, the framework has implications for teacher education, and the implementation and development of policy.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Recent years have seen increasing numbers of children, in particular those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), deregistered from schools to begin home-education (Children's Commissioner, 2019), which the UK government acknowledges can meet children's individual needs (Long & Danechi, 2022). This article presents a way to understand circumstances precipitating children's deregistration, and experiences of families who transition away from the traditional UK school system due to unmet learning needs.

Though school attendance is the norm, home-education of children by their parents or others in the community is legal across the UK. However, who undertakes the practice, what it entails, and their reasons for doing so can seem shrouded in mystery (Lees, 2010). If children have not been enrolled at school, there is no statutory requirement to register an intention to home educate, thus the extent of such practice remains unclear. Numbers of children reported to be home educated have risen across the UK over the past decade. For example, in Wales the increase was more than five-fold between 2009/10 and 2021/22 (Statistics for Wales, 2022). Similar patterns have been noted officially in Northern Ireland (Beattie, 2022) and unofficially in Scotland (Schoolhouse, n.d.). Between 2016 and 2021, 'official' figures for England were extrapolated from responses to the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), with the most recent survey of local authorities indicating 115,000 children were home educated in the 2020–21 academic year (ADCS, 2021).

These annual survey responses have confirmed increases in the proportion of children with identified SEND deregistering to become home educated in England (ADCS, 2021). In some local areas, up to 10% of children beginning home-education had an education health and care plan (EHCP). This contrasts with most recent national figures of 4% of children in schools (ONS, 2022). The Children's Commissioner suggests that teachers are not trained to identify children's needs and lack the resources to support them; furthermore, those with poor academic results may be 'abandoned by schools' (2019, p.8). Ofsted (2019) notes a trend for some schools to encourage the parents of such children to begin home-education. A form of off-rolling, Ofsted (2019) considers that this is unlikely to benefit the pupil or their family but may improve the school's ranking based on academic results.

The research on which this article is based explored the sequences of events leading parents to home educate their children with diagnosed or suspected SEND. The investigation aimed to understand families' transitions to and networks within home-education, and how these underpinned their developing practices. Previous research in this field has considered reasons families begin home-education (Kendall & Taylor, 2016) and discussed practices (Rothermel, 2002). This study is believed to be the first to specifically focus on home educated children whose 'additional' needs were considered unmet at school, the transitions they and their families undertook or underwent around school deregistration, and their establishment of new educational practices and routines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

UK POLICY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

As already noted, reported numbers of home educated children throughout the home nations have risen over recent years, though these figures remain estimates. Guidance to parents varies across the UK, and although each nation provides related information, home-education is not referred to in official advice to parents regarding their duties and available choices as children approach school age. Regarding children described by the Children's Commissioner (2019, p.8) as 'abandoned', England's current legislation places responsibility for identifying SEND on local authorities rather than schools (DfE/Doh, 2015). Nevertheless, Ofsted (2021) found 'inconsistencies in the identification of children's and young people's needs' noting 'a lack of coordinated support [...] at school level' (p.38).

Local authority interpretations of national law, and their subsequent advice to parents is similarly inconsistent. For example, Hampshire County Council 'recognises that home-education is a key aspect of parental choice. EHE [elective home-education] is equal, in law, to education provided in school' (HCC, n.d.). The webpage includes links and information including the local

authority role, further education provision at 14+ and funding for GCSEs. This contrasts with a Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea job description for their 'elective home education officer' whose first listed duty is to 'to identify and track such children until they are placed in a school or in receipt of education otherwise' (RBKC, 2019, p.1). Monmouthshire County Council (MCC, 2017) offers a single paragraph referring to home-education, instructing parents of children below school age to advise the local authority of an intention to home educate, though this is not a legal requirement.

Inconsistent approaches may obfuscate perceptions of home-education. Lees and Nicholson (2017) suggest this contributes to the 'marginalis[ation] by ignorance' of home educators and their practice (p.306). The Education Committee (House of Commons, 2021) recommends a home-education register and revision of key government documentation to include home-education 'so that both families and local authorities know where they stand' (p.40). The ADCS considers registration should guarantee local authority provision of services to home educators (Crocker, 2023). Home educators argue that a register would be used to monitor families (Ofsted, 2019).

Whereas the UK government recognises children's SEND as one reason why parents may home educate (Long & Danechi, 2022), for some parents, home-education has been seen as a 'last resort' (Maxwell et al., 2018; Morton, 2010, p.46). This is not new; Rothermel (2002, p.41, citing Blacker, 1981) reports the term 'compensator' was used to describe families who began home educating after negative school experiences in the 1970s. Kendall and Taylor note a parental perception that schools made 'little or no effort [...] to support their children' before they began home-education (2016, p. 304).

UK research into home-education is arguably well-established; however, few studies have focused on the home-education of children with SEND. For example, Arora (2006) focuses on families of children with SEN in one local authority area. Parsons and Lewis (2010) report on a study of home educators following on from earlier school-centred research with families of children with SEN. Kendall and Taylor's (2016) study reports on the experiences of children withdrawn from schools due to unmet learning needs. Data for these studies were gathered before England's 2014 SEND reforms. In Wales, Maxwell et al. (2018) suggest home-education may be a better option for some children with additional needs. This apparent paucity is not restricted to the UK; for example, Slater et al. (2020) found only one Australian study of home educators of children with disabilities, conducted in 2007.

PARENT-PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS

The importance of parent-school partnership is recognised in the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework (DfE, 2023), the SEND code of practice (DfE/DoH, 2015) and Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011). Parental self-perceptions as active partners in their children's education may additionally result from neoliberal education policies (Vincent, 2017). The 'marketisation' of schools promises parent choice and expects in return, a degree of 'responsibility and self-reliance' (Vincent, 2017, p.542). Yet parental interest in their children's education can be judged as 'too much or too little' by some teachers (Vincent, 2017, p.547). Difficulties in parent-teacher communication have long been recognised (e.g. MacLure & Walker, 2000) and may result in parents feeling compelled to agree with teachers during meetings (Bilton et al., 2018). Vincent (2017, p.547) asks whether increased workloads mean teachers lack sufficient 'time and energy [...] for home–school initiatives' regardless of any expectations of policy already discussed. A failure to communicate effectively risks ignoring rather than discussing conflicting views, which MacLeod and Tett (2019) consider a lost opportunity to support individual children in their learning.

Vincent (2017) argues that parent voice and choice in their children's education extracts a compromise that favours schools: 'parental responsibility and self-sufficiency [...is] a discourse with some utility when welfare state support services are being reduced' (pp.542–543). Pratt (2016) suggests prevailing UK systems of standardised assessment mean that marketisation can, by extension, cause schools to 'value' students' academic attainment as a 'good' corelated with teachers' professional success (p. 898). This may impact individual children, shared concerns of Ofsted (2021) and the Children's Commissioner (2019). According to Norwich et al. (2021), school inclusion relies on a 'balancing of risks' between adjustments to practice and

potential marginalisation of children and young people, subject to 'teacher capabilities, contexts and resources' (p.312). Done and Murphy (2018) consider neoliberal teacher accountability both divisive and unsustainable. As noted by Shepherd et al. (2017), parents seeking to meet their children's educational needs face parallel pressures.

Teachers are expected to 'understand [...] the needs of all pupils [...] and be able to use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them' (DfE, 2011, p.12). However, Rutherford (2016) suggests that that an ideology persists from the past that inclusion draws on skills beyond the reach of 'regular' teachers. This arguably disables learners, and leads to 'dysconsciousness' in teachers, who can be uncritical of institutional practices that risk—or even tend towards—exclusion (Rutherford, 2016, p. 132). Gaps between policy expectations and the implementation of inclusive practice have been noted to contribute to a 'need for warrior parents' (Ofsted, 2021, p.15). Combined with the findings of previous home-education research noted above (e.g. Kendall & Taylor, 2016; Morton, 2010) and the Children's Commissioner (2019), this seems to reflect the discussions of Norwich (2016; 2019) related to conceptualisations of school inclusion and to necessary future improvements to policy and provision in England.

Expectations placed on teachers with limited resources may erode trust between families and the settings attended by their children. Bormann and John (2014) suggest this extends to the education system itself. Parental assumptions for their children's education may be based on Ofsted reports, school results and so-called league tables combined with the promise of policies and frameworks already discussed. Families can feel they have no choice but to home educate if they believe children's education and welfare to be jeopardised by broken policy promises (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study's theoretical framework needed to reflect participants' changing status and the staged processes they underwent. This framework should also account for catalytic interactions between families and schools, that may at times have driven these changes and processes. To do this, the research developed a new conceptual framework combining Turner's liminal theory (1969) and stages of social drama (1974) with the refined bioecological systems model discussed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) simpler ecological model is often referred to in education-related literature (e.g. Burns, 2022). The later model was necessary to explicate participants' complex school interactions and experiences, and their transitions to and within home-education.

Transition to and from school has long been considered as a 'rite of passage' or in the context of a 'threshold', including in research (e.g. Ackesjö, 2013, p.391). Turner's (1969) development of threshold concepts recognised that 'liminal entities' transition 'betwixt and between' what are—normally—stable and socially acceptable states, often sustained by experienced others (p.95). Such support, or 'communitas', Turner (1969; 1974) argued, would normally come from those who had reintegrated into the social norm, but this required that the reintegration process already be institutionalised. Turner's four phases of social drama trace this from 'breach', through 'crisis' and the potential for 'redressive action' to offer 'reintegration' or, where this is not possible, 'social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between the contesting parties' (1974, pp.38–41). Turner's liminality, communitas and stages of social drama are applied to circumstances, processes, and transitions of participants away from school, into and within home-education, to understand **how** families undergo such transitional experiences. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model provides a way to appreciate **why** families undertake these transitions. The conceptual framework has potential to be used by schools and professionals across education, health and social care, to recognise and perhaps ameliorate the circumstances of future families.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design was developed with reference to Plowright's (2011) integrated framework and combined parent and family interviews with an online survey. Barring limited closed

demographic items, open questions collected narrative responses, deviating from Plowright's (2011) approach. Presented in Table 1, the study integrated face-to-face participation of seven parents and six children with the responses of 92 parents and one young person to an online survey. The qualitative survey was expected to offer breadth of data through national participation; case studies were planned to ensure depth and to represent children's views (Gillie, 2022). Research results and themes corresponded across data collection methods. While these overall methods are outlined here briefly to situate the study in context, this paper presents findings from the survey responses to introduce the conceptual framework.

Table 1 Methods/data overview.

	PARENT PARTICIPANTS	DIRECT CHILD PARTICIPANTS	DATA COLLECTED AND ARTEFACTS SHARED
Online survey (UK wide)	92	1	Written responses
			(68,513 words)
Online interview	1	1	Recorded interview
			Transcripts (7378 words)
			Concept map
			Email exchange
Family visits with researcher participation	3	5	Recorded interviews
			Transcripts (50035 words)
			Field notes
			Concept maps
			Email exchange
			Photographs/letters seen
Parent interviews	3		Recorded interviews
			Transcripts (11958 words)
			Field notes
			Email exchange
			Photographs/letters seen

The study was motivated by encounters with home educating families whose children with SEND had previously attended school. This informed the main research question:

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

To design the schedule of questions, parents of children with SEND were consulted who had deregistered from school to home educate. This was intended to reduce power imbalance between researcher and participant (Thomas-Hughes, 2018). Four parents drafted questions based on what they felt schools should have asked about deregistration, and what they would have liked to know before undertaking home-education. Illustrated in Figure 1, this was developed based on the meta-planning focus group technique (see Roland et al., 2015). The process took place online, through individual audio or video-calls and email, to protect privacy while acknowledging all contributions. Survey anonymity means it is unknown whether members of this advisory panel chose to participate.

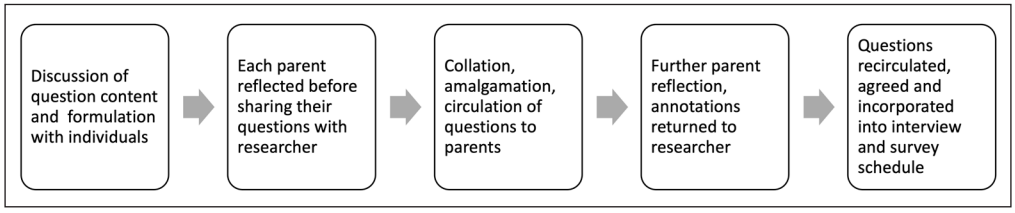

Figure 1 Question co-production.

Home educators have been described as active and confident users of the Internet (Fensham-Smith, 2017). Therefore, as also considered by previous researchers (e.g. Parsons & Lewis, 2010), online recruitment and survey participation seemed accessible and convenient for these busy parents. The survey, which ran from February to December 2019, is summarised below.

Survey

The survey was created and distributed using Jisc Online Surveys. Responses would be personal and possibly sensitive, and it was important that participants had full control over the details they chose to share; therefore, all questions were optional. To recruit participants, the survey link and an invitation to take part face-to-face were posted on my professional blog, Twitter, and in closed Facebook groups for home-educators and/or parents of children with SEND. From these locations, participants shared the survey further, enabling contributions from 93 families with six months to over a decade of home-education experience. No minimum experience of home-education was required, and parents reported on children's school experiences across the compulsory school age range. One young person, a GCSE student who did not disclose their age, contributed to the online survey. These data were included in the analysis, since listening to and valuing young people's voices is intrinsic to the study's ethical stance. This is in keeping with the right of children and young people to participate and make their views known (Alderson& Morrow, 2020).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through design and implementation, the study sought to avoid inadvertently compounding the marginalisation of participants who may already be vulnerable. Garcia and Ortiz (2013) advise researchers to consider and respect intersectionality, which has been noted previously in home-education research (e.g. Bhopal & Myers, 2018). The research design followed British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2018) and the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014). Survey design and data analysis were additionally guided by the Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (AoIR, 2019). The study's methods: design, participant recruitment, and the wording of the survey, including participant information, consent and withdrawal were reviewed and approved by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. Data collection and storage complied with University and GDPR requirements.

DATA ANALYSIS

In keeping with the study's epistemological position outlined above, Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis have been applied to the data. Illustrated in Figure 2, this method accounts for the sole researcher's responsibility for developing and maintaining consistency in analysis and the acknowledgement of an informed position.

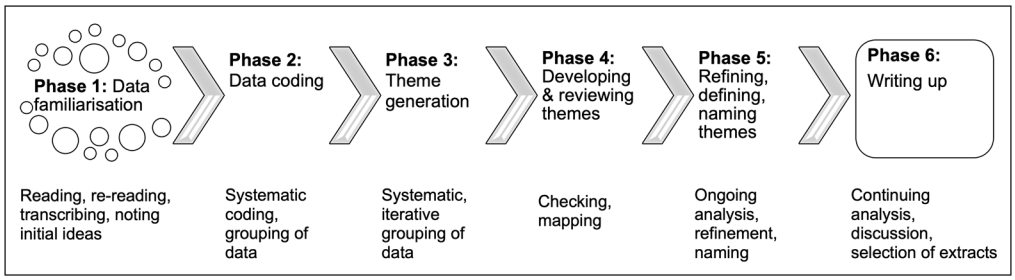

Figure 2 Application of reflexive thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Underpinned by the two-part research question, four clear themes were developed through thematic analysis as noted above. Patterns in the data both contributed to and were refined by the study's theoretical framework, presented in this article. The first two themes: *Circumstances* and *Processes* pertain to the school-related experiences reported by participants, discordant events taking place in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) that brought on, or exacerbated feelings of liminality (Turner, 1969). Unresolved, in keeping with the process-

person-context-time model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), this leads to crisis (Turner, 1974). These informed the third theme: *Transitions*, occurring due to a failure of redressive action (Turner, 1974) over time – Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem. All three, the focus of this section, contributed to the fourth: *Practices*, related to participants' evolving home-education undertakings and support networks, beyond the scope of this article. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

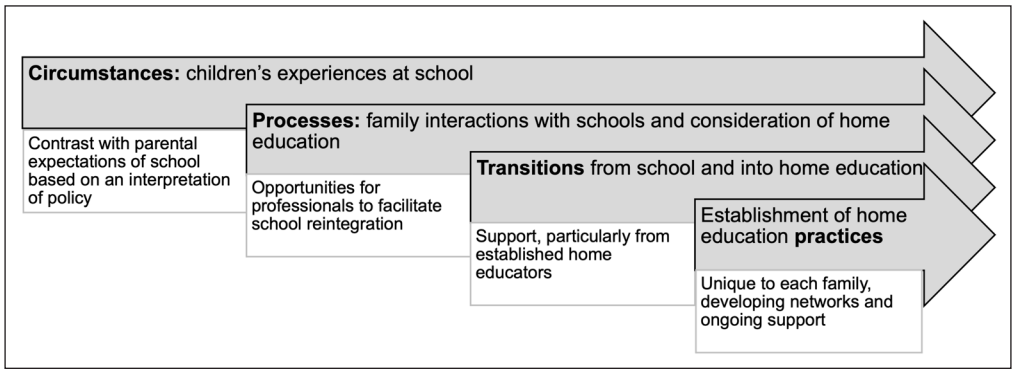

Figure 3 Identified themes.

CIRCUMSTANCES

Parents' expectations of schools

Responses to the survey's opening question: *What did you anticipate about your child/children's education before they reached school age?* contextualise participants' perspectives. Most responses to this question related to one of three parental expectations:

1. children would remain in school, perhaps progressing to college or university (22%): 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%): 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' in children (25%): 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.'

Children's school experiences

Replies to Question 2: *What circumstances led you to home educate? Please describe the decision-making process*. document a transition to disappointment from initially high expectations of schools. An example of this can be seen in the responses of S73 (18/03/19):

> 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.

Transition to school, between schools or key stages, and sometimes to a new class or teacher caused or exacerbated difficulties for some children (27%). For some, the transition to home-education was precipitated by deterioration in children's mental health (33%) or ongoing distress (44%):

> 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)

Certain responses indicate a gulf between teachers' and parents' understanding of children, for example, one parent, a teacher herself, reported that her son's autism diagnosis had been received following transition away 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) recognise that classroom teachers cannot reasonably be expected to identify and support children's mental health difficulties. This is also reflected in parental responses, such as, 'it is very disappointing, but also very realistic to reach the conclusion that our mainstream schools struggle to support good mental health' (S32).

Bullying (26%) and anxiety (32%) following a school transition drove some families to deregister:

> 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)

One parent (S82) who had remained in full-time education to postgraduate level found her daughter's experience of school as bewildering as it was distressing, as 'she started to develop severe anxiety about social situations in general and school in particular.' The child was called 'emotional' and a 'drama queen' by staff. Another child was deregistered aged ten when:

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

PROCESSES

Parent-school relationships

The range of parent-reported issues contributing to breakdowns in school relationships and eventual transition to home-education is illustrated in Figure 4. Parents described schools' misunderstanding or denial of children's needs (73%). Sometimes this led to difficulties in accessing local authority or NHS diagnostic and support services, though participants also reported teachers 'failed to understand [...] needs despite a diagnosis' (S26). Other parents reported shock on hearing of difficulties for the first time at a parents' evening, for example 'after 2 terms in reception I was told not to expect anything from my eldest' (S15); or S8, who was told she '[...] needed to do much more work with [her five-year-old] at home if [she] expected him to catch up'.

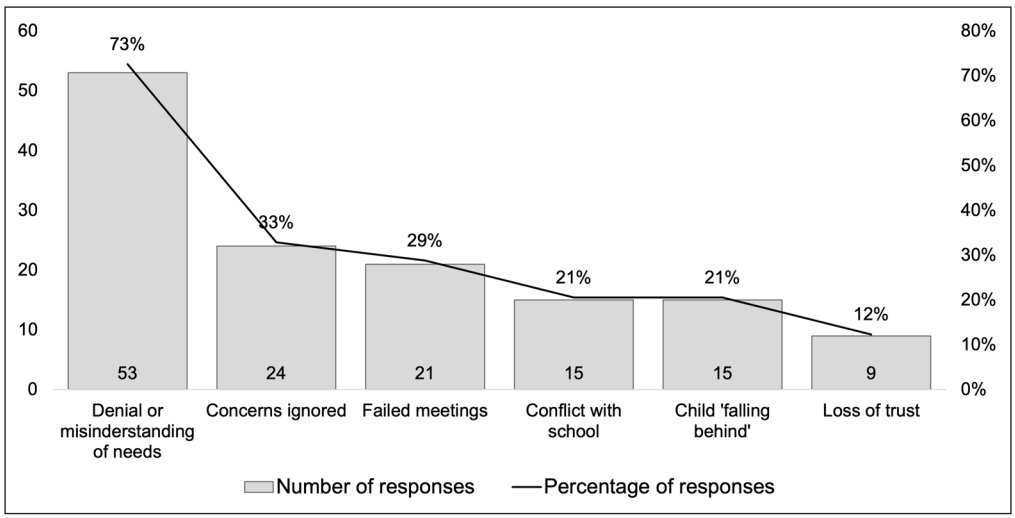

Figure 4 Parent-school relationships and experiences.

Parents described the frustration of 'years in meetings' (S28) and 'repeated discussions with school, but nothing changed' (S33). Most reported more than one of the experiences charted in Figure 7, with 26 parents outlining three or more. Participants considered the views of education professionals to differ from their own, and from their children's, for example, 'telling me that [my child] was fine when she wasn't' (S32). Conflict–linked to failed meetings (29%) and to schools not addressing the concerns of families (33%)–led to irreconcilable differences and resulted in transition from school to home-education. At times, this was described in 'warring' terms, echoing Ofsted (2021):

> 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)

> 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)

The bio-ecological systems model can be used to analyse and understand the impact of 'proximal processes' between an individual and those they interact with (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007, p.796). Such processes may be 'positive' leading to 'competence' or 'negative', resulting in 'dysfunction' (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007, p.803). For the study's data, a possible representation combining bioecological systems theory with Turner's (1974) stages of social drama is illustrated in Figure 5. Based on their interpretation of policy, parents might have expected schools and teachers to act as a bridge to wider services for their children. These types of mesosystemic interactions between teachers or schools and local authority, health and social care resources were considered lacking or detrimental by the study's participants.

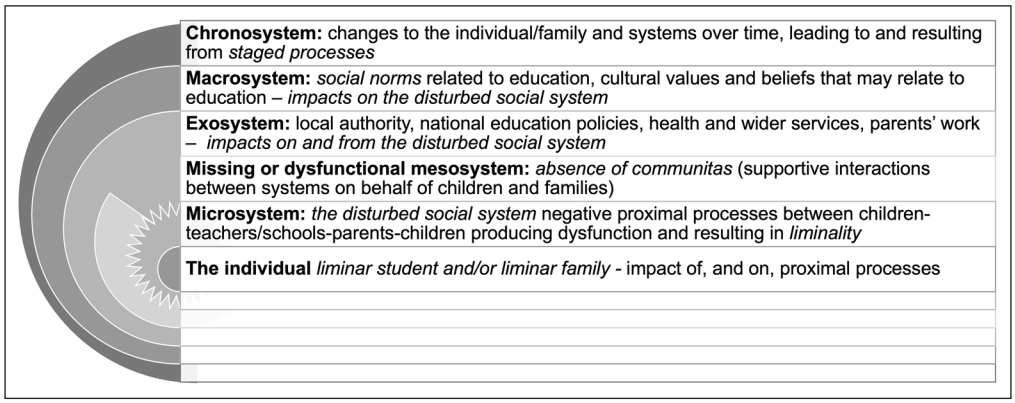

Figure 5 Relationships informing transition from school following Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model, italics indicate elements of Turner's social drama.

Considering home-education

Parents described investigating alternatives to school education, undertaking 'detailed consideration and research' (S50), for 'hours and weeks researching online' (S17) or longer '3–4 months' (S53). Some families reported trialling home-education first 'we agreed to give it a go, just for the year' (S44), 'we tried [...] for the summer holidays' (S84). At times, it was proposed by the children, such as when 'my daughter brought the idea of home schooling to me [... I] knew something had to change so I agreed to trial it' (S33).

Parents described realising that school might not be the best place for their child, for instance, 'school could not provide the type of environment he needed to thrive' (S38); 'I honestly believe [this happened] because the school was not the right environment' (S93). In rare cases, parents and schools agreed:

> 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)

Some parents stated that home-education was initially an involuntary undertaking, for example, 'I have had no choice but to home educate' (S7); 'we were left with no other choice'

(S64). Others expressed frustration at the official terminology 'Elective Home Education', 'there is nothing elective [about] our home education' (S23); 'this is NOT elective home education' (S41); 'this was not elective' (S58); I refused to de-register her as I was not going to be forced into 'elective' home education' (S21).

Just one-fifth of participants reported support from their close networks when beginning home-education, with parents describing 'disapproval' (S37), 'discrimination and suspicion' (S80) from family and friends that led to 'friction' (S74) and feelings of ostracization. This was sometimes exacerbated by encounters with strangers:

> 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)

It is possible that reproof experienced by these families is informed by mystery and subsequent mistrust of home-education described by Lees (2010), and/or a perception of school attendance as a national duty noted by Bhopal and Myers (2018). Families gave voice to the extent to which this was felt and its consequences, for example:

> 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)

The loss of trust expressed by parents related to their children's school experience extended beyond deregistration: '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).

TRANSITIONS

Transitioning to home-education

Since home-education is undertaken by individual families, it is perhaps unsurprising that reported practices vary in the immediate aftermath of deregistration. Whereas S37 recalled 'we deregistered on the Friday and began HE on the following Monday,' some families began home-education in September after the summer holidays and still others found more time was needed to adjust. For example, S30 'spent 6 months taking time to heal'. S63 'spent 2 years deschooling' a term coined by Illich (1971) and adopted by some home educators to describe the period between deregistration and undertaking of planned—rather than incidental—learning experiences.

All but one participant reported their experiences of local and national support networks, including home educators' groups, charities, camps and other annual events, or charities and groups dedicated to families of children with additional needs. This is shown in Figure 6.

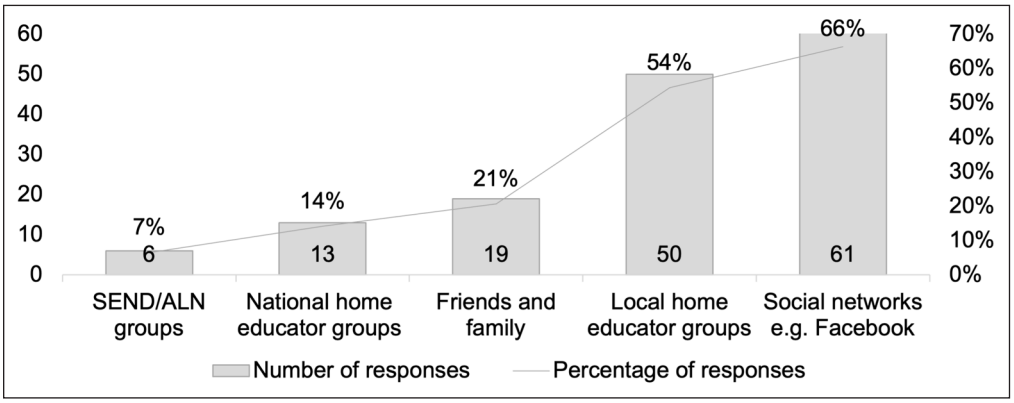

Figure 6 Support networks.

Over half considered activities organised by local home-education groups as opportunities for learning and socialisation. The word 'community' was used to describe this (29%), for example: 'They made lots of friends and we became part of the Home Education community' (S76). Of the six parents whose support came predominantly from SEND/ALN-focused groups, five said their children had not yet begun to participate in group activities, for example 'we are working up to attending HE groups as her anxiety becomes more manageable' (S81).

The proportion of parents reporting participation in social media groups is perhaps unsurprising since the survey was circulated online. Furthermore, given the family and community experiences of censure noted above, the relative anonymity and opportunity to observe in online spaces may offer some confidence to some parents, for example: 'I've never messaged anybody in the group, but I sometimes find the information helpful' (S70).

Transitions within home-education

One child's transition to home-education did not mean others in the family automatically deregistered, for example: 'our second child attends school, [...] the environment suits him' (S3). As well as potentially complicating the social difficulties noted above, this placed logistical demands on parents: 'I juggle my time [...my] husband can be flexible with his work' (S12). Things were not necessarily easier for parents whose children were all home educated:

> 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)

Participants noted that the opinions of family and friends sometimes changed over time, for example, 'some [...] objected until they saw the state of my daughter. They then saw how she flourished and have been very supportive' (S14). Feelings of parents, who may have undertaken home-education reluctantly also changed. For some, this seems transformative:

> 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)

> 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)

> 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)

Outlining possible enhancements to their children's home-education, parents listed examples such as access to a national resources bank and local facilities normally only available to schools, funding for GCSEs (available in some, but not all areas of the UK) and flexi-schooling, where home educated children attend school part-time or for specific subjects. A small number of parents described successful flexi-schooling, offered by very few schools (Gutherson & Mountford-Lees, 2018). Other participants (15%) reported that they had tried but been unable to negotiate flexi-schooling, perhaps because this impacts schools' attendance figures and resultant ranking in England and Wales.

Staged transition

As noted, for some families the deregistration was driven by factors including children's long-term difficulties, their mounting distress, and/or successive failed parent-school meetings leading to a realisation that school was not 'right' for their child. Participants described critical moments informing their decision to home educate, sometimes extending over prolonged periods. Such parents reported 'detailed', 'thorough' research, for 'weeks' or 'months' before withdrawing from school to home educate. Some deregistered to mitigate the impact on children of long-term discord with teachers, schools and/or local authority representatives or departments.

For certain families, deregistration resulted from exclusion; others were clear that they had had no choice but to deregister, echoing Turner's (1969) concept of a 'passenger [...] pass[ing] through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state' (p.94). With their reduced macrosystemic agency, the same applies to children. Turner expects such liminal entities to be supported through the communitas of others who have come through the ritual process. For most study participants, this support was provided by existing home educators.

The study replaced Turner's 'breach' with *discord*, to reflect the experiences of parents and children outlined in previous sections. Discordant relationships with schools made it difficult or impossible to engage with education system processes. As in Turner's (1974) metaphor, with no support from school—the 'disturbed social system' (p.39)—such discord led to crisis for participants. In a traditional model of liminality, 'communitas'—support from previous liminal entities, or 'liminars'—should facilitate reintegration. Turner considered the reintegration stage must be institutionalised so that 'a basic generic bond is recognized beneath all its hierarchical and segmentary differences and oppositions' (1974, p.57). Otherwise, an 'irreparable schism' results, and communitas can only be provided by others who already operate outside the accepted social norm (Turner, 1974, p.41). For the study data, this is illustrated in Figure 7. Whereas 40% of families aspired to re-enrol at school, the children of just three participants had done so successfully, highlighting issues around reintegration.

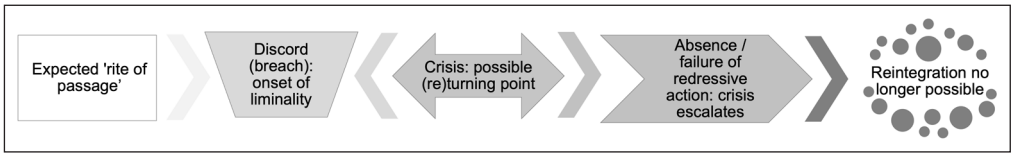

Figure 7 Transition from school as stages of social drama, adapted from Turner (1974).

Most participants described their developing home-education practices positively, sometimes with family support, but more often supported by parent networks and other home educating families. For some parents and their children, relationships with more experienced individuals and groups seemed key to establishing their educational practices outside school. Such communitas was reportedly found, locally, nationally, and online, in parent-run groups for home educators and/or for parents of children with additional needs. Rather than reintegration into the school system, the study data indicate this form of communitas supports transition to confident home-education. This echoes Turner's (1974) contention that social drama is resolved through coherence that is 'a function of communitas' (p.50).

In this context, Turner's 'communitas' has parallels with Bronfenbrenner's 'mesosystem', with potential to ensure children's education through facilitating interactions or 'proximal processes' between individuals and relevant 'systems' or 'structures'. In the same way, lacking mesosystemic support and/or school-based proximal processes that are dysfunctional might cause *discord* leading to families' experience of 'crisis'.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reported experiences provide context to discordant school relationships. Accounts of professional actions and reactions reflect discussions noted in the literature, that:

- education and school are routinely considered synonymous;
- centralised standards, devolved and limited budgets cause schools to lose sight of children as individuals, and see them instead as 'goods'; and
- parents are generally expected to defer to professional understandings.

Parents' disappointment in professional practice was perhaps exacerbated by their high expectations based on what they saw as promises of policy. These expectations seemed unrealisable by schools, though families had considered them reasonable. Turner's stages provide a framework for analysis and understanding of the breakdown in relationships between children's schools and families in the study. Figure 8 summarises the circumstances, processes and transitions reported by families in the context of a social drama where difficulties caused and/or exacerbated by dysfunctional proximal processes result in transition into a new microsystem.

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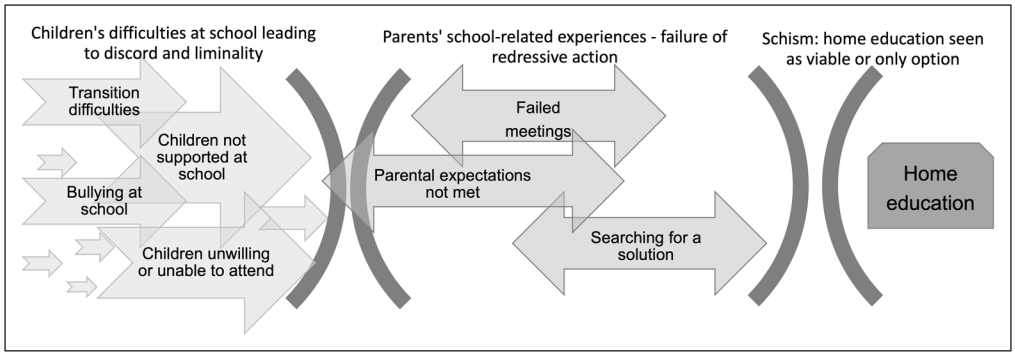

Figure 8 Staged processes reported by parents, using an adaptation of Turner's social drama.

This framework can also offer a way for teachers and other professionals in education, health and social care to recognise discord when it arises, so that 'crisis' may be averted. For the study participants, discord was not resolved when parents sought 'redressive action', leading to 'irremediable schism'. As previously noted, parents conducted detailed enquiries into home-education while children continued to attend—or be enrolled at—school. Perhaps, then, reintegration might still have been possible up to the moment of deregistration. However, despite its prominence in policy, findings suggest that 'parent-school partnership' can be elusive in these situations. Shown in Figure 9, to promote reintegration the study's framework might be used to reconceptualise meetings and other school communications as opportunities for 'redressive action'.

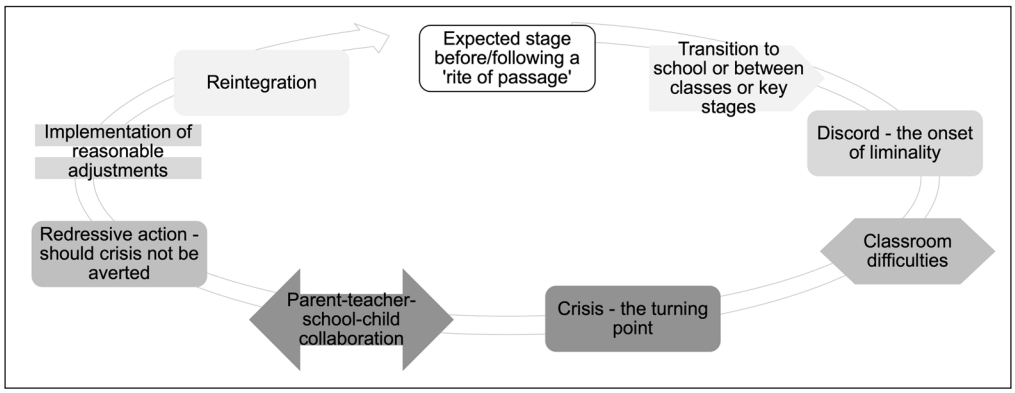

Figure 9 A way to remain in or return to school, reflecting Turner's stages of social drama.

In this model, redressive action would be provided through the communitas of education professionals, so that families might regain confidence in schools. Future discord and crisis may then be averted, through positive microsystemic relationships and the mesosystemic interactions of educators in the interests of children and their families. Arguably, these result from, and in, positive proximal processes that take account of process-person-context-time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) manifesting in relationships between educators, learners and their families as a school-based communitas. This relationship understands that discord may sometimes lead to crisis, but also recognises that redressive action from schools and teachers, and collaboration between professionals, families and children can support reintegration. Where existing regulations expect inclusion, the study's theoretical framework offers a way for policy makers and professionals to recognise and understand families' circumstances.

The existing exosystem encompasses current policy and professional standards and requires inclusion; however, policy makers should recognise that a legal requirement does not guarantee its implementation in the education, health and social care system. Real-terms funding cuts to schools and resulting shortages of staff and resources noted in the literature inevitably impact the ability of schools and allied services to fulfil the promises of policy. In keeping with the study's co-productive design, recommendations from its findings were shared with home educators for feedback. These include:

- Specific, ongoing training for teachers in special educational needs, inclusive practice, and working in partnership with families throughout children's schooling.
    - This is already in place for safeguarding. Indeed, given the NSPCC's definition of safeguarding includes 'preventing harm to children's [...] development' and 'taking

action to enable all children and young people to have the best possible outcomes' (NSPCC, 2023, What is safeguarding?), this would complement annual safeguarding training in schools.

- Flexi-schooling should be permitted without impacting schools' attendance figures or funding formulae.
- To help schools and education departments better understand families' needs, a local authority role might be developed to bring consistency to approaches currently in place. This advisor role could be undertaken by an inclusion specialist with experience of alternative, informal and/or community education.

The study's framework is not designed to prevent families moving to home-education but may support macrosystemic culture change. The professional role outlined above could foster 'communitas' and 'reintegration' for schools, and/or support new home educators with referrals and in their developing practice, working collaboratively with parents, schools and allied professionals across health and social care.

Whilst it spans mainland Britain, the study's small scale is recognised. Future research should foreground participation of children and young people. This study gathered perspectives of families rather than professionals. To build on this, investigating professionals' work-related experience of the processes leading up to deregistration, has the potential to confirm the staged processes from a school perspective. Insight from such a study might build towards the requirements for 'reintegration', into schools or in supporting families as new home educators.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Research data are accessible at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22732145.v1.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

The research, including all participant information and consent, was reviewed and approved by the Open University (OU) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC, reference number HREC/3030/GILLIE). Data collection and storage comply with University and GDPR requirements.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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