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The Home Education Experience: what can it teach us?

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I, Peter Stephen Bowers, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

Despite rising in popularity, home education remains a controversial practice in the UK. Currently, Local Authority Educational Psychologist (EP) involvement with home education is limited to Statutory Assessment procedures, and many EPs have little experience with or understanding of home education. Yet EPs are a service for all children, particularly those who are experiencing non-traditional educational paths as home educated children are. With the additional emphasis placed on the voice of the child and the voice of the parents within the Children and Families Act (2014) and associated Code of Practice (2014), it is even more important that EPs and other professionals seek a greater understanding of the context of home education, both for Statutory work and for possible greater involvement in home education in the future.

This study aims to provide a meaningful exploration of the experience of home-educating children and parents through qualitative analysis of interviews with home educated young adults, as well as parents who are or were home-educating their children, with a view to informing the practice of Educational Psychologists. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with participants, and analysed through Thematic Analysis. Several themes were identified, including core themes of authenticity and freedom, and the research offered a constructive perspective of the social development of home educated children. This is particularly important as concerns about social development are often central to the negative view of home education held by many people unfamiliar with home education.

These themes were explored in terms of how Educational Psychologists could use them to understand the home education ecosystem in a more meaningful way, as well as using lessons from home education to provide deeper insight into school-based education.

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1   Introduction

1.1   Research Background

The number of children being educated at home is increasing, but little is known about this population and there is no effective model for how home-educating families and Local Authorities can work together for the benefit of the child. This project seeks to achieve a greater understanding of the experience and situation of parents who educate their children at home, with a view to informing the practice of Educational Psychologists. Home-educating (HE) parents are a diverse group who can be hard to identify as once a child is formally withdrawn from school, HE parents are not required to make their status known to any Statutory body. Whilst there are examples of HE parents who have a wholly positive experience and a constructive relationship with their Local Authority (LA), there are a significant number who have had unsatisfactory experiences of LA and/or school services. Similarly, there are a range of attitudes towards HE parents from individual schools and Local Authorities, and some of these attitudes can act as barriers to a collaborative relationship with home.

One definition of the role of the Educational Psychologist (EP) is "improving the opportunities of all children and young people" (DfE 2011, p5), but to date there is little by way of guidance, methodology or opportunity for EPs to improve the opportunities of children who are educated at home. It is likely that amongst the population of HE families, there are some who would benefit from EP services, as well as opportunities for EPs to learn from good practice in the HE community, but until the situation of home education is better understood by EPs and Local Authorities, it seems likely that both types of these opportunities will continue to be missed. EP work often involves establishing the strengths and needs of a child or young person, exploring the resources available in the individual and the surrounding systems, and orchestrating an approach to meet the needs effectively. The

effectiveness of applying this model to HE situations will depend on how well the EP can understand and explore the systems and experiences in each situation. The aim of this work is not to make any claims of a common experience between all home educated children and their families, but to provide a degree of context within which EPs can better understand individual situations.

1.2   Personal Background

My interest in home education began when I was working as a primary school teacher for a supply agency. After working in various schools, I accepted the role of "Home Tutor", providing individual education for young people who had been permanently excluded from mainstream school but had not yet accepted a place at a special provision. I was not given any guidance about educational content or assessment of progress, so I chose to adopt a collaborative and responsive approach to learning sessions. I was greatly struck by the way each of the young people I worked with responded to the opportunity to learn what they wanted to learn, especially as each had disengaged from school education and initially each was reluctant to meet with me. Over time, each young person cultivated their own interests, and developed a determination to follow their curiosity. I was conscious that, although the role tapped into the enthusiasm and approaches to learning that inspired me to train as a teacher, the approach I took felt completely different to everything I had learned on my teacher training course and in four years of classroom practice. I also learned how I could get more engaged learning into an hour of tutoring time than I managed in an entire school day in the classroom.

Immediately prior to embarking on the Educational Psychology Doctorate, I worked as a teaching assistant in a primary school, and one of the children in my Year 6 class had just joined the school after being home educated up until that point. His learning profile was very different to the other children, in that he maintained a very positive learning attitude despite

having significant gaps in his literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge. Also, he enjoyed weaving his interests into his learning by referring to hobbies and favourite story characters in class discussions. I saw the potential of his attitude and his creativity, whereas some other staff regarded his home education experience as exclusively contributing to the deficit in his performance against age-related expectations. I understood the perspective of the staff as driven by accountability for his performance in the Year 6 Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), but felt disappointed that there seemed very little opportunity or desire to acknowledge or develop his strengths. My curiosity persisted into the Educational Psychology Doctorate, and on my initial placement I discovered how little Local Authorities knew about, engaged with or understood home education. My training has focused on the approach of working with young people, their families and their schools to identify any unmet needs and then fostering collaboration to meet those needs effectively. As I embarked on this research project, I was focused on how EPs could provide an equivalent level of support young people in home education that we provide for young people in school.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Method

The initial literature review was carried out using the search terms homeschool* and home+educat* into the PsychArticles database. Homeschool was used to access research originating in the U.S. that used that terminology. Unfortunately, results were conflated with similarly-worded areas of research, such as home-school interactions, so as well as scanning the database results the approach was augmented by using the references in recent relevant articles.

2.2   Home Education

Home Education has been a presence in British society since before Universal Education was introduced, and became enshrined in law in the Education Act of 1944. (Webb 2011). The 1996 Education Act places the responsibility on parents and guardians to provide appropriate full-time education through attendance at a school "or otherwise" and whilst home-educating is not named, it is through this provision that it achieves legal legitimacy (Monk 2009).

There has been a reported rise in popularity of home education in the UK, although there is no consensus as to the cause for this rise (Rothermel 2004, Thomas & Pattison 2007). Despite this increase, there is relatively little UK research into home education (Webb 2011). Webb refers to the greater abundance of U.S. research, but notes that "American and British models of home education may not be similar enough to make comparisons valid" (p55). Webb's concern is supported by Rothermel, who comments on the significant proportion of Home Educators in the U.S. doing so for reasons of teaching exclusively Christian ideals, most notably creationism, whereas this is not a significant factor in the UK (Rothermel 2003).

The classification of home-educators into meaningful sub-groups has proved a challenge to researchers (Rothermel 2003). Categories such as idealogues, pedagogues, competitors,

rebels and compensators have been considered but not generally accepted (Rothermel 2003), although the distinction between pedagogues (home educators with a distinct philosophy of education) and ideologues (home educators who focused on ideals, usually religious conservatism) proposed by Van Galen (1988) has proved "remarkably resilient" with researchers in the U.S. (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Even the term 'Elective', as applied by the Badman Review (2009), might seem inappropriate to those parents who remove their children from school because they feel they have no alternative way to secure successful education (Parsons & Lewis 2010).

Rothermel suggests a "Stratum Approach", beginning with viewing home-educators as a 'superficially homogenous group' (Level 1), then identifying levels of differentiation of views that culminate in different views within individual families (Level 4) (Rothermel 2003). This approach offers a structure that captures both the commonality and diversity of situations experienced by home-educators, as well as reflecting assumptions that can be made by professionals working with home educators.

A practical classification used by some researchers makes the distinction between children and young people who have never attended school and those who have been withdrawn from school (Jennens 2011, Thomas 1998). Jennens explores these categories and suggests that, for children who have never attended school, the decision may have been made on the grounds of ideological, moral or religious convictions. For children withdrawn from school Jennens considers that the reason may be a response to a problem at school, such as bullying or the child's unhappiness (Jennens 2011). Whilst these conclusions seem reasonable, it is important to note the significant burden that home education places on the family, and so it is possible that some home educators may initially enrol their children in school out of pragmatic necessity and then remove them once home education became possible, or choose

to remove children from school as the result of a "conscious effort to reject conventional social structures and conformity to what they saw as tyrannical systems" (Morton 2010, p47).

Despite the complications in assigning individual HE situations into categories, it is clear that there are a variety of reasons that parents choose to home educate their children. Whilst parents who do not enrol their children in school may have many reasons behind their choice, the decision is often about the advantages of home education rather than a negative view of mainstream school (Medlin 2000). Reasons cited by home-educating parents for removing their children include inadequacy of local SEN provision, failure by school/LA to acknowledge or address perceived SEN need, mental/physical well-being of the child (e.g. significant bullying), breakdown of relationship with school/LA, failure to secure a statement (now EHC Plan) and response to threat of prosecution when child is out of school (Badman 2009). These are all situations in which an Educational Psychology Service can contribute by supporting the process of adapting the school environment to best suit the needs of the child (Arora 2003), although all of these reasons appear to relate to children and young people who have been removed from school. Whilst such input from EPs could theoretically result in some parents choosing to leave their children in the setting, the aim would be to make the setting as appropriate as possible and thereby giving the parent the best possible options to choose from. In effect, it is ensuring that the decision to home educate is a positive one, and not a reaction to the school failure to meet a child's needs.

In 2009, the UK Government published the House of Commons Review of Elective Home Education in England, known as the Badman Review (Badman 2009). Parental responses to this review constituted "a heady mix of pent-up rage, frustration, resentment and a rejection of third-party judgement" (Badman 2009). This is doubtless in part due to one of the main themes of the Badman Review, which was the conflict between a home-educator's legal responsibility to provide a suitable education as well as their right to privacy and the need for

the State to ensure the appropriate education, health and care of each child (Badman 2009). The legal aspect of this conflict is unclear, and in several European countries the right of parents to educate their children at home has been overturned by the European Court of Human Rights "in the general interest of society" (Monk 2009, p161). Whilst the incidents of home-educators being guilty of neglect or abuse are rare (Rothermel 2010), home-educated children do not usually come into regular contact with professionals able to identify and respond to concerns (Jennens 2011). Furthermore, legislation in the UK places responsibilities on Local Authorities, such as 'appropriate education' and 'adequate steps', without defining the meaning of these terms and without adequately empowering LAs to ensure these standards are being met (Badman 2009, Jennens 2011). Despite the stronger legal claim of the protection of the child, most sources seem to agree that the solution to the conflict between State responsibility and parental privacy lies not in legislation but in more clear and constructive communication between home-educators and the Local Authority (Badman 2009, Monk 2009, and Jennens 2011), especially when considering the money and resources that needs to be spent on legal proceedings (Monk 2009).

An example of a situation that results in families withdrawing a child from school in favour of home education is school refusal, which is thought to affect around 1%-2% of the school population (Nuttall & Woods 2013). School refusal can occur due to a variety of "pushing" and "pulling" factors, such as bullying, separation anxiety and exam pressure, and effective interventions require a whole-school approach as well as the resilience and persistence of professionals to remain actively involved (Nuttall & Woods 2013). An alternative approach to school refusal is home education, which in one study was found to alleviate the symptoms of anxiety present in school refusers, and contrary to common assumptions enabled a significant number of participants to reintegrate successfully back into school after a period of home education (Wray & Thomas 2013). Wray and Thomas note the observation made by

Fortune-Wood (2007) that home education is rarely considered as an option in the UK. The Local Authority officials participating in the author's previous small-scale dissertation reinforced this observation, and consistently expressed this view. Each of the LA officials interviewed in this study were positive in their attitude towards home education, but did not question the 'unwritten policy' of the LA to inform parents about home education when asked, but not to suggest or encourage it (Bowers 2015).

The potential role of the EP in home education has been explored in research focusing on the experience of parents who were home-educating children with Special Education Needs (SEN). Four stages where EP involvement could be critical were identified: before the families started considering home education, when the families started to consider home education, once the families started home education and if the families were considering a return to school for their child (Arora 2006, p62). Arora notes that the different stages require different support, with the initial stage often representing "a period of struggle, unhappiness, high tension and insecurity" which has often calmed down by the later stages.

Despite the stages for potential EP intervention being identified almost a decade ago, there has been no sustained attempt to develop more effective approaches to supporting home education. It is important to note that EP involvement with home-educating families is very limited, as the Local Authority EP resource is usually reserved for children and young people in a Local Authority setting. The exception to this is where a child or young person being home educated qualifies for statutory work [i.e. reviewing Statements of Special Educational Needs (Statements), contributing to or reviewing Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)]. In these circumstances, the Local Authority must provide the services of an EP, although the EP is restricted with regards to their methods of engagement in terms of time and approach when carrying out this work as it is statutory.

This research project is required to contribute to the working practice of EPs, so it will address aspects of home education that fall within the remit of EP work. Currently this appears to be children and young people currently learning in a LA setting but whose parents (or guardians) are considering home education, as well as situations of statutory work outlined earlier. As a result, EPs are only likely to be involved in the first two of Aurora's stages unless the family chooses to pay for a private EP.

As a result of the financial crisis of 2008/9, austerity has become a major factor affecting the provision of all public services, resulting in reduction in both the scope and the level of service available (Aylott *et al*, 2012). The issue of funding support for home education was addressed in the Badman Report, which observed that should any child educated at home return to school, the Local Authority would be able to draw down the Age Weighted Pupil Unit (Badman 2009, p35), and made the case for this money to be available to Local Authorities to provide support for home education. As a result, Recommendation 28 of the report is "That the DCSF and the Local Government Association determine within three months how to provide local authorities sufficient resources to secure the recommendations in this report" (p35). Whilst the public reaction to the report was characterised by strong objection to the recommendations of registration and monitoring requirements (Rothermel 2010), it seems that those same objections have helped justify the failure of the government to fund the recommended home education provisions. Indeed, the House of Commons Education Committee stated that "home educating parents have always taken on the financial responsibility for the education of their children and the Government is not seeking to change this principle." (House of Commons Education Committee 2013). A disadvantage of the limited scope for EPs to work with home–educating families is that they will miss the opportunity to learn from the successes of more experienced home educators, a topic that will be explored in the discussion.

There are many cases where home education has had dramatically positive impact upon mental health issues or learning issues of children and young people that have proved resistant to interventions by the state schools those children attend (Fortune-Wood 2007, Beck 2010, Wray & Thomas 2013). Whilst distilling generalisable lessons from a small sample taken from a heterogeneous population is challenging due to the individual circumstances and environment of each case, there is definitely scope for identifying key factors that could better inform mainstream practice (Mhuircheartaigh 2015).

Effective research into home education in the UK is made complicated by two factors: the lack of requirement to register home-educating children and the hesitance of many home-educating parents to engage with their Local Authority (Webb 2011). The law in the U.K. does not oblige home-educated children to be registered with the Local Authority, although the child will be known if he or she has been withdrawn from a school in that Local Authority (Monk 2009). Consequently, it is not possible to establish accurate numbers or demographics for the home educated population. Local Authorities are informed of home education when a child previously registered at a school is taken 'off-roll', if there is a Social Care concern, or if the parents choose to inform the Local Authority (usually if there is a concern over Special Education Need) (Jennens 2011). The number of children registered as home educated has been reported as around 20,000, and the actual total is suspected to be several times higher (Badman 2009). This affects the research in two ways: without knowing the total population there is insufficient context for considering the characteristics of any sample (Rothermel 2010), and access to the home-educators not known to the Local Authority is primarily through advertising, resulting in self-selection effects (Webb 2011). In their comprehensive survey of research into home education, Kunzman and Gaither (2013) cited 351 English-language research texts to establish what the research revealed and what had not been addressed. As referenced earlier, the authors acknowledged the difficulties

inherent in home education research due to identification issues, diversity of the population and low response rates. They noted that the studies are almost entirely qualitative in nature, and that in several cases quantitative studies failed to control for relevant demographic variables (such as family income and years of parental schooling) when comparing with national averages. As a result, they highlighted the need for more quantitative studies employing controlled, random sampling to allow meaningful comparison to mainstream school studies. They also considered the importance of studies employing rigorous longitudinal data to examine whether home education has any long-term impact on adult life.

2.3   This Research

This research project is a development of the author's small-scale dissertation which explored the experience of home education from the perspective of HE families and LA officials to inform EP practice (Bowers 2015).

The author's dissertation involved semi-structured interviews with home-educating parents and Local Authority staff that had responsibility for monitoring home education. It explored two research questions: what are the issues with home education from the parent and professional perspective; and how does and could the Local Authority support home educated children? Through thematic analysis, nine common areas of concern were identified that fell into two main themes; Home Experience and Parent/LA Interactions.

The first theme, Home Experience, covered the direct experience participants had relating to the home-life aspect of home-educating. The sub-themes that arose across both groups of participants were Curriculum, Socialisation, and Life of Parent. The second theme, Parent/LA Interaction concerned the ways in which parents and the Local Authority interact over home-educating. The sub-themes that arose were Educational Psychologist Contribution, Local

Authority Operations, Parent-Local Authority Relationship, Monitoring Visits and Informing Parents.

The key findings of the research were that the principle perceived challenges faced by home-educators were socialisation and establishing a curriculum, although both challenges were generally addressed during the initial year of home education, and that both LA and HE families felt that EPs were well-placed to support families (not a specific research question, and Educational Psychologists and their role did not feature on the interview schedules).

Of particular interest to the author was the sub-theme of socialisation because both the parents and the LA Officials expressed views that differed significantly from the perspective offered in the literature, which reported widespread assumptions framing home-educating as a significant obstacle to developing social skills (Badman 2009, Thomas 1998). It was clear from responses that both the parents and the Local Authority representatives regarded social development as important, but neither were deeply concerned about achieving it in the home education setting. The parents interviewed spoke of a variety of social activities, both through home-educating organisations and organised independently, and the LA representatives regarded this as a topic for encouraging parents rather than as a source of great concern. Parental comments about the advantages of home-educating socialising over the 'homogenised' classroom experiences inspired the author to reflect on how Educational Psychologists often work with children in mainstream provision who experience issues with social relationships, and the assumption is that the general social environment of school is healthy and the most nurturing and appropriate (unless a systemic intervention is required, such as a school-wide anti-bullying programme). The author reflected that their own experience of mainstream education, as a child, as a teacher and as a Trainee Educational Psychologist may have contributed to 'normalising' a particular set of social conditions,

making the author less aware of the effect they may have. The fact that a school environment is familiar does not by definition make it 'normal' or 'healthy'.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the small-scale dissertation. The opportunistic sample of home-educating parents, by virtue of the method of selection, was limited to parents who have a good relationship with an Educational Psychologist (as they were invited to participate by members of the Local Authority Educational Psychology Service). Similarly, the Local Authority representatives interviewed were not drawn from a comprehensive list of professionals who are involved in home-educating cases, although they do represent a variety of key roles. Finally, the sample population was drawn from a single Local Authority. This was necessary to ensure that the parents and LA Representatives were commenting on the same system as there is a broad range of variability between different Local Authorities in terms of their approach to home-educating (Badman 2009, Rothermel 2002). These limitations affect the generalisability of the themes. Unfortunately, limitations like these are common and difficult to circumvent in home education research (Kunzman & Gaither 2013).

Whilst some home educators are happy to discuss their reasons for home educating, their approach and their pedagogy (Thomas & Pattison 2007), many feel strongly that they are entitled to privacy (Monk 2009). As a result, response rates to questionnaires are often poor, leading to questions over the characteristics of the responders and the non-responders. The Badman Review includes a recommendation for a consultative forum for home-educating parents (2009, Recommendation 4), but representation is challenging when the constituency is unknown.

2.4   Socialisation Versus Social Development

Having identified socialisation as the focal area of the research, it is necessary to consider a

complication that arises from the terminology. The literature relating to socialisation can be

confusing as the terms "social development" and "socialisation" are used in a confounding

way (as was the author's experience when conducting interviews for the pilot dissertation).

Some research considers socialisation to be the preparation of an individual to take their

place in society; "how children are… assisted to become competent, and contributing,

members of the social community" (Grusec & Davidov 2010, p 687). Other definitions stress

the effectiveness of the individual "Socialization (sic) is the process whereby the helpless

infant gradually becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable person" (Giddens 2006, cited in Beck

2008, p 59). Another definition of socialisation combined the two elements: "socialization

(sic) entails not only how children interact with others in various social settings, but how

children develop convictions about what is important to them and why" (Kunzman & Gaither

2013, p21). For the purpose of this thesis, the following definitions have been selected as

broadly representative. Socialisation is considered to be "the process by which a human being

beginning at infancy acquires the habits, beliefs, and accumulated knowledge of society

through education and training for adult status" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2017). The

definition of social development used is "how people develop social and emotional skills

across the lifespan, with particular attention to childhood and adolescence" (Alleydog

Psychology Glossary 2017).

Social development of home educated children and young people is often cited as a primary

concern by researchers and education professionals (Bowers 2015, Medlin 2000, 2013,

Rothermel 2003, Badman 2009). Research that compares the social development of children

and young people who are home educated to those in school often use self- and parent-

reported measures and analysis of pro- and anti-social behaviour, without offering a robust

theoretical underpinning to the initial concern (Kunzman & Gaither 2013). In their

comprehensive review of HE research, Kunzman and Gaither noted that amongst the

limitations of the current body of research into HE is the biasing factor of political motivation

(Ibid). They note that a significant body of research in the U.S. is commissioned by home

education organisations, and that often the conclusions drawn fail to take into account serious

design flaws, such as fundamental sampling issues, that severely reduce the generalisability

of findings (p 5). They also note that other research appears politically motivated against

home education. This political motivation is perhaps epitomised in the Badman Report

(2009), which expressed some extreme and poorly-supported anti HE views and noted the

passionate objections of members of the HE community to many of the opinions expressed

(Stafford 2012). A pertinent question is why does the social development of home educated

children and young people remain such a polarising subject?

With the absence of an explicit over-arching framework for development of social

development, it would seem to be difficult to justify the sentiment that home education is

automatically detrimental to the social development of the children and young people who

take that academic route instead of state school. However, the assumed environmental

suitability of mainstream school is a factor contributing to the enduring nature of the deficit

model of school related issues, where the cause of learning and behavioural problems is

considered to be "within child" (Harry and Klinger 2007). The perspective of the social

environment of mainstream school as a "constructed world of same-age peers" (Fortune-

Wood 2000, p58) is difficult to contradict, and there is not clear evidence supporting the

notion that this environment is better-suited to preparing young people to be socially

competent in adult life. School can be considered as a "complex social arena", in which

children need to learn how to initiate and maintain friendships whilst managing peer

acceptance (Majors 2012, p128). Majors notes that these processes, along with the frequent

rejections and break-ups need to be dealt with "in ways that are not typical of adult friendships" (p128), raising questions about the relevance of school social experience to life as an adult.

Medlin has reviewed research that addresses the issue of social development within home education (Medlin 2000, 2013). In his first review, Medlin considered three questions: Do home-schooled children participate in the daily routines of their communities? Are they acquiring the roles of behaviour and systems of beliefs and attributes they need? Can they function effectively as members of society? (Medlin 2000, p110). Medlin critiques a number of research articles, and concludes that although the few studies that can be considered robust yielded positive answers to these questions, "they simply underscore that more – and better – research is needed" (p118).

Medlin reconsidered the body of research in 2013, and found that whilst research was still far from conclusive, it "suggests that [HE children] have higher quality friendships and better relationships with their parents and other adults", and "exhibit less emotional turmoil and problem behaviours than their peers" (Medlin 2013, p284). Medlin concludes by recognising that the tools of research typically employed in social development research (such as surveys and interviews) risk missing the "complex nature" of social development (p294). Reference is made to research by Rapaport, who used daily prolonged observations, and found that social skills were being taught in "unplanned moments, as a response to the child's ongoing behaviour" in HE settings (p294).

The cultural aspect of child development is considered by Rogoff, who observes that western research regularly fails to acknowledge the impact of culture on the shared environment of the behaviours they consider (Rogoff, 2003). For example, Rogoff compares community practices around the care of infants by older siblings, and notes that allowing 3-year-old

children to care for 18-month-old children would be unacceptable in the West but is standard practice amongst the Kwarar'ae of Oceania (p4). Rogoff argues for greater awareness of the cultural specificity of our notions of development, and suggests that "development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities – which also change" (p3).

Lave and Wenger explored the cultural aspects of learning, specifically the theory that learning is an activity that takes place through participation in a Community of Practice, a group of people who share a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better through regular interaction. (Lave & Wenger 1991). Safran applied the theory to home-educating parents and their membership of HE groups, and concluded that Legitimate Peripheral Participation (a process where newcomers to a community of practice become full participants by joining in at the periphery and gradually move more centrally through practice) provides a meaningful framework for understanding the flow of HE group membership (Safran 2010). Safran also explored the value of considering Legitimate Peripheral Participation as a way of understanding the cultural influence of the Community of Practice on those families who do not become full members of an HE group to show that social learning can take place in "more subtle situations than might at first be apparent" (p111).

The consideration of culture in the home education literature reviewed for this thesis is not always clear, but there are some emergent patterns. For example, in a paper that explores the development of a more meaningful definition of "suitable education" (the phrase used in the legislation to describe the education that parents are legally-bound to deliver), Davies (2015) exposes the absence of a clear definition of what a suitable education would look like. Through consideration of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as well

as various pedagogical and philosophical sources, Davies constructs a list of what home

education should address:

(a) Development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities;

(b) Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in

the Charter of the United Nations;

(c) Respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for

the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or

she may originate and for civilisations different from his or her own;

(d) Development of a responsible life in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality

of sexes, and friendship among all people, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons

of indigenous origin;

(e) Respect for the natural environment.

(Davies 2015, p28).

Davies reflects on the complexity of establishing whether these requirements have been met,

a matter which he feels the HE community has a right to expect to be resolved prior to the

establishment of a compulsory monitoring regime. However, he makes no comment on

whether these standards are met or even addressed by the state education system. Similarly,

in an article that presents a critical view of home education, Lubienski explores the way in

which home education limits the choices available to the child / young person being home

educated (Lubienski, 2003). There is no mention of ways in which state education limits

choices, which can be interpreted as state education representing the most complete set of

options. The issue here is not whether these assumptions are correct or not, but is that they

are not acknowledged as assumptions or supported by any evidence. The two form of

education – home and school – are not subject to the same level of scrutiny and examination.

The literature does contain some harsh criticism of the culture of state education. Meighan suggests that the origin of bullying behaviour in U.K. schools is the system itself, where the Government and School Inspectors bully the school, the senior management bullies the teachers and the teachers bully the students – "The unwritten, but powerful, message of this package is that 'adults get their way by bullying'" (Meighan 2005, p10). The organisational structure of schools as involving "large groups in larger institutions" has been ascribed to the origins of the school system in the Industrial Revolution (Fortune-Wood 2000, p60). The British school system has been compared to that in Finland in terms of social justice, with the significantly lower social mobility in Britain attributed to streaming, de-valuing of teachers, inspection, testing and "naming and shaming" (Reay 2012, p595).

Després (2013) considers the origins of public educator resistance to home education through a literature review to identify critical factors that inhibit acceptance. He proposes that, although on the surface the objections relate to factors like social development, at the heart of the resistance is the discussion of purposes of education. State education appears to have become about testing, and "only home education is capable of achieving the purposes of state education" (p369). Whilst Després does not provide an explicit definition of the purposes of state education, he draws on Bruner's view that education is "a major embodiment of a culture's way of life, not just preparation for it" (p368).

2.5   The Role of the EP

With this polarisation of opinion and heterogeneity of language regarding the social development of the social development of home educated children and young people, how can Educational Psychologists make a contribution? Or to put it another way, how can an EP use the available research to inform the execution of the roles outlined by Arora (2003), as well as identifying other opportunities to improve the opportunities of all children and young people engaged in home education?

EPs have had an "almost perennial obsession with reflecting on their role" (Boyle and Lauchlan 2009). Fallon, Woods and Rooney (2010) summarise the role by saying "EPs are fundamentally scientist-practitioners who utilise, for the benefit of children and young people (CYP), psychological skills, knowledge and understanding through the functions of consultation, assessment, intervention, research and training, at organisational, group or individual level across educational, community and care settings, with a variety of role partners." (p4). The role of scientist-practitioner is facilitated by the move from a one-year training program to the current three-year Doctoral-level training, which allows for a greater depth of coverage of theoretical underpinnings as well as far more substantial research (Evans et al 2012).

The 'utilisation of psychological skills' element of the EP role raises an interesting question. Qualitative research involving interviews with EPs of varying experience indicates that subjects found it 'difficult to answer' whether their work was "psychology at all, let alone good psychology…" (Burnham 2013, p27). Burnham questions the need for EPs to consider themselves or be considered by others as scientific, and suggests considerations for the role of EP along pragmatic lines. These suggestions do not mean a relaxation of rigour or awareness of theories, but serve to "prevent eclectic practice becoming incoherent or opportunistic" (p 30). Burnham introduces us to the term *bricoleur*, which he defines as "professionals who devise bespoke solutions in naturally-occurring contexts with combinations of the often less-than-ideal theoretical and practical materials at hand" (p26). In this approach, the legitimacy of knowledge is derived from practical value rather than the more traditional scientific value of "congruence with existing perspectives or solutions" (p26).

The bricoleur approach appears appropriate to the home education situation, where there is little consensus in the research and little opportunity for the development of standardised EP

practice due to the heterogeneous population and limited opportunity. Burnham sets out some suggestions for a pragmatic approach to the EP role, including that "EPs should develop and maintain the highest levels of critical awareness of the theories and knowledge that support and challenge their practice", and EPs should see their practice as a "natural outgrowth of the concerns and needs of the communities in which they live and work, and construe themselves as providing a negotiated service in cooperation with those communities" (Burnham 2013, p30). Therefore, this research project will address those two strands; reviewing the literature of Social Development, and a development of an eco-systemic perspective of the culture of home education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner considered the impact of the social environment surrounding an individual on their behaviour, and composed an eco-system of "nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (p3).

2.6   Social Development

The process of social development is not clearly defined within the literature, although social processes are viewed as essential components of development. Modern education makes use of the social constructivist Social Development Theory of Vgotsky, which explores the opportunity to learn within the "zone of proximal development" that exists between what an individual can achieve independently and what they can achieve through social mediation (Long *et* al, 2011). Social Learning Theory, as proposed by Bandura, holds that at each stage of learning (observational learning, self-regulation, self-efficacy and reciprocal determinism), the learning experience is affected by the way the individual identifies with the source of the learning (whether direct instruction or from observing the behaviour of others) (Grusec 1992). Grusec notes that Bandura's theory does not adequately address the impact of developmental changes on behaviour, and suggests that the theory would be more popular in developmental psychology if it could offer more detail on age-related changes (p784). Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Personality Development is also used to place a context on

social development, with a process of internal conflicts resolved over a series of eight stages (Upton 2012). This theory describes the process by which an individual's personality develops from the resolution (or failure to resolve) of eight key conflicts or issues (Erikson, 1963). Erikson's theory is often characterised as proposing a series of eight age-related stages, beginning with Infancy (birth to 18-months) and ending in Maturity (65 – death) as an intrinsic component (Knight 2017, Upton 2012, Leyden & Shale 2012, Whitbourne, Sneed and Sayer 2009).

Most researchers approach social development in terms of the skills and abilities required for successful navigation of the social environment, as opposed to providing a particular model or framework for acquisition of those skills or abilities (Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000, Penala *et al* 2015, Nucci *et al* 2015), Grusec & Davidov 2010, Molden & Dweck, 2006, Huston *et al* 2015). For example, research into the development of behavioural inhibition in middle childhood identified emotional regulation as a regulator in social competence later in life (Penala *et al,* 2015). The purpose of Penala's research was to inform work on pathways of risk and resilience, and the findings have relevance to the practice of professionals working with children at risk of developing social behaviour complications. The conclusions can be used to inform interventions on a developmental trajectory, but do not contribute to a theoretically-ideal environment for social development. Instead, social development is described as a complex interaction of skills, experience and environment.

In an overview of social development, Dweck (2013) highlights how developmental molecular genetic research is showing that the influence of an individual's genes on their social behaviour is more significant than previously thought, although the process of navigating the complexity of gene X environment interactions is still in relatively early stages. Dweck also addresses the interaction between an individual's temperament and the

environment (temperament X environment interactions). For example, Dweck refers to a study by Crockenberg which found that the level of infant irritability was a significant factor in whether mother's level of stress and social support affected secure attachment (p10).

In a development of the "Bioecological model" of human development, Bronfenbrenner and Evans propose that "in order to develop – intellectually, emotionally, socially and morally – a human being, whether child or adult, requires – for all of them – the same thing: active participation in progressively more complex reciprocal interaction with persons with whom he or she develops a strong, mutual, irrational attachment, and who, over time, become committed to each other's well-being and development, preferably for life." Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000, p122). This proposition is not context specific, and in principle it should be possible to apply to social development in any context. Whilst there is no inherent cultural value within the proposition itself, there is an important point arising from the connection drawn between intellectual and social development regarding home education, and more specifically the process of learning to read.

The mainstream school approach to the teaching of reading is often highly structured, involving explicit phonics instruction and a reading scheme of books that become progressively more challenging in terms of vocabulary, structure and theme. Reading progress is monitored using any one of a number of standardised assessments, which often give an equivalent 'reading age' based on comparing scores to the assumed standard linear progressive trajectory for literacy development. In contrast, evidence from autonomous home education challenges the very notion of a standard learning trajectory, with accounts of reading development that was non-linear, non-progressive, or sometimes non-linear AND non-progressive (Pattison, 2016).

Another aspect of learning that is rarely captured is the level of engagement in learning. A study into this aspect of home education found that participants had consistently high

intrinsic motivation in their learning, contrary to the mainstream trend of growing disaffection (Jones 2013). This sense of ownership is attributed to the autonomy afforded these children in making their own academic choices.

These findings are a reminder that failing to take account of the cultural aspects of development, such as the culturally-specific nature of external manifestations of development, can limit the potential of research to fully respond to its question. The need for cultural sensitivity is perhaps enhanced by the delicate nature of the development of home education practice. Many home-educators experience a shift in approach to home education, from greater formality at the start (using timetables, following a curriculum, etc.) to a more informal approach, often over the initial year (Thomas 1998). This relaxation of structure is not attributed to diminishing effort, but instead reflects the developing pedagogy of the educator and the learner, who experience the limitations of the structure and the opportunities of informal learning. The culture of home education was explored in greater detail in a study that examined the evolution of home educator practice in the environment of Communities of Practice (Safran 2008). It is important to note that the environment of Communities of Practice involve many levels of reciprocity, which may be difficult for mainstream education professional to appreciate, and may be adversely affected by the professional's presence.

The discussion of opportunity and suitability of social interactions in school and HE environments has been explored without resolution (Kunzman & Gaither 2013), and there is a perceived need for "educators and researchers alike to reconsider home education and educator roles for the 21st century… as co-workers towards a perceived common goal for children" (Després 2013).

2.7   Research Questions

In the light of these conclusions, this research aims to contribute to the evidence-based practice of Educational Psychologists in relation to home education by exploring how members of the HE community perceived their experience of home education, with a focus on social development. The following two research questions were formulated to guide the research:

Research Question One - How do Home-Educating parents and Home-Educated young adults understand and engage with the social development of Home- Educated Children?

Research Question Two - What can Educational Psychologists learn from experiences of home education?

3   Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed to address the research questions in terms of the epistemology, the research design, the participants, materials used and the procedures followed.

3.1   Epistemology

There is little consensus within the existing body of home-educating literature with regards to the ethics, philosophy or practice of home-educating. Even the legality of home education is uncertain, as the European Court of Human Rights upheld the decision of the German Government to enforce a ban on all forms of home education, leaving the possibility that such a ban could potentially be sought in the UK (Monk 2009). Considering the often oppositional and sometimes confrontational perspectives expressed by parents and Local Authorities, the most appropriate epistemological position from which to build this study is a social constructionist one. This approach asserts that human beings make experiential sense of their world through interacting with other people (Burr 2003). Central to Social Constructionism is the notion that this understanding is the reality constructed by that individual, so the aim of the research is to better understand the constructed reality of home education for each participant, in order to address the research questions.

3.2   Research Design

With so little reliable data on the population of home-educating families in the U.K. and with the inherent issues in accessing participants the only reasonable approach to addressing the research questions was a qualitative methodology which would be better suited to eliciting meaning from subjective data (Lichtman 2006).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was considered as a method of exploring how the participants make sense of their personal and social world in detail (Smith & Osborn

2006), but the heterogeneity of the home education population does not allow for generalisability of the rich individual experience captured by IPA, reducing the suitability of this approach to addressing the research questions.

As a main purpose of the research was to inform Educational Psychology practice, the required methodology needed to enable the identification of themes in each interview that were common across the population. Several qualitative methods make use of thematic analysis to establish patterns within and across texts, but Braun and Clarke argue that it can be considered in its own right as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) in data" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p79).

3.3   Participants

As has been noted in the literature review, research into home education often encounters low response rates to attempts at participant recruitment. As also noted in the previous section, the pilot study for this research involved using an opportunistic sample recruited by contacting home-educating parents known to the Educational Psychologists within one Local Authority, rendering the findings open to the criticism that they may only generalise to other members of the home education community who had a positive relationship with a Local Authority Educational Psychologist (Bowers 2015). It is important to place this criticism in context, as the absence of definitive demographic information about home education families in the UK, and with a lack of consensus in the literature over meaningful ways to categorise families within the HE community, it would be unrealistic to consider any sample of home education families to be representative of the whole population.

Given the inherent impossibility of identifying a "representative" sample, the process for recruiting participants for this study was developed with the intention of broadening the generalisability of the findings. The intention was to recruit a heterogeneous population of

potential participants from a variety of home education groups. This was achieved through a process of contacting key stakeholders within home education groups and events. In some instances, the author attended meetings and gatherings to talk to home educators about the research. Some discussions held with home educators helped to shape the research questions and the interview schedule, but, with the exception of the young people who were home educated, interviews were not conducted with people the author had already met, to reduce the bias created by the author's own views and perception of the home educators.

3.3.1   Home-Educating Parents

The home-educating parent participants were a sample drawn from a population of home-educating parents who had responded by email to invitations issued in HE community newsletters and on websites. Each respondent was logged, along with their general geographical location and their preferred level of participation (some participants expressed an interest in discussing the relevance of findings from the research but did not wish to be interviewed). Participant selection occurred through random number selection of the participants, although selections were rejected if they were within the same Local Authority as any previously-selected participant to provide a variety of LA and home-educating group experiences. This process would have been assisted by demographic data from potential participants, such as which home-educating group or groups they belong to, their experience of their LA, and for how many years had they been home-educating. On reflection, the author decided that obtaining such information of questionable value was not worth the risk of dissuading potential participants from responding. In addition, such questions may have been interpreted as revealing assumptions and priorities in the research that could have interfered with the process of building rapport that is essential to effective interviewing.

The two exceptions to this process were the pilot interview participant, and the contact person for an HE community situated in a location visited by the author on a family holiday. In both

instances, the decision to use the interview was made by weighing the benefits of the opportunity against the necessity for following the population protocol. In the case of the pilot interview, the participant was known to a colleague of the author and represented a practical opportunity to pilot the interview schedule. After reflecting on the data gathered, the author decided to include the pilot interview as the interview schedule had proved effective and the opportunistic sample would not be repeated. The final parent interview arose from the opportunity to conduct an in-person interview during a vacation trip the author took within the UK. Having contacted a local HE group and having received several enquiries from potential participants, the only option within the limited timeframe of the visit was the parent who was the author's initial contact with the group. The author decided that the opportunity to conduct an in-person interview outweighed the potential disadvantage of having had a conversation about the research with the participant.

3.3.2   Home-Educated Young Adults

The young people who were home educated involved in the study were a group of friends that live together. The author first encountered members of the group at a home education festival. The decision to interview the young people was made based on the rare opportunity to speak to home educated young people about their experience. The author also considered that the conversation with the young people at the festival consisted mainly of them sharing their views, and that their voice would not be unduly prejudiced by the previous conversation with the author. Of the four participants in this group, two initially attended school and were then taken 'off-roll', and the other two were home educated until they chose to attend college for GCSEs. All four have engaged in further education.

3.4   Materials

In preparation for the semi-structured interviews, a schedule was drafted with some open questions designed to elicit a broad and rich account of experience from each participant (see Appendix A). The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and then transcribed in full. The original intention was for the author to transcribe all the interviews. However, due to the amount of data gathered (over 15 hours of interview) it was necessary to use a confidential transcription service for some interviews.

Despite the popularity of analysis software for applying codes and themes to text, the author chose to carry out the analysis manually, by annotating printed transcripts.

3.4.1   Interviews

The intention with the interviews was to give participants the opportunity to talk broadly about their experience of home education, and also to elicit greater detail of topics relating to the research questions and / or of particular relevance to each participant.

The original intention was to conduct each interview in person, however the decision to ensure geographical diversity within the selected sample created logistical constraints that necessitated the use of remote interviews in some cases. In a study exploring the value of telephone interviews to elicit narrative data from potentially marginalised participants, Drabble *et al* (2015) identified three key strategies: cultivating rapport and maintaining connection; demonstrating responsiveness to interviewee content, concerns; and communicating regard for the interviewee and their contribution. (P118). They conclude that through use of the key strategies, telephone interviews constitute a practical and effective method of gathering data.

The initial remote-interview was conducted through an internet video call service to facilitate rapport, but the arising technical issues (including a constant slight time delay between

speech and transmission, interruptions to the picture and poor-quality sound making interpreting the recording more time-consuming) affected the flow of the interview and the development of rapport with the participant. The loss of quality also made the process of transcribing more arduous. As a result, subsequent remote interviews were conducted by phone.

The in-person interviews were conducted in a location selected by the participant. One interview was conducted in a room in the UCL Institute of Education building, another in a secluded area of a public bar in a health spa, and the rest were conducted in participants' homes.

3.4.2   Interview Schedule

Semi-structured interviews rely on an effective schedule to provide a combination of consistency of questioning between interviews and options for exploring key areas within interviews. The primary purpose of each interview was to elicit the authentic voice of each participant, and this was reflected in the initial question of each schedule.

3.4.2.1   Parent Interview Schedule

The parent interview schedule began with a request for the participant to "tell me about the circumstances that led you to choose to home educate" (see Appendix B), although several participants did not require a prompt to start sharing their story. Subsequent questions were used to clarify and expand upon the author's understanding of what the participant was sharing. The schedule contained potential follow-up questions to expand upon this topic if necessary. The schedule also had exploratory questions arranged into three groups: What has home education been like for you?; what has home education been like for your child/children?; and Reflection. Questions exploring social development were contained within the section titled: *What has home education been like for your child/children?* This

served the dual purpose of placing the conversation about social development within the broader context of the child's overall experience as well as broaching a potentially challenging subject with subtlety.

3.4.2.2   Home-Educated Young Adult Interview Schedule

The opportunity to speak to the home educated young adults presented the dilemma of whether to conduct the meeting as a group interview or a focus group. A key distinction between a focus group and a group interview is that in a focus group questions are not put to each of the participants in turn while in a group interview each participant has a chance to respond to each question (Wilkinson 2009). However semi-structured interviews are much more fluid in nature than structured interviews, so the distinction is less clear for this research. Consideration was given to opportunity that focus groups provide for the researcher "to observe how people engage in the process of collaborative sense-making; how views are constructed, expressed, defended and (sometimes) modified within the context of discussion and debate with others" (Wilkinson 2008, p 189). Whilst this process of construction would have contributed to an understanding of the social constructionist aspect of sense-making, the decision was made to adopt a group interview approach instead for three reasons. First, the parent participants contributed through semi-structured interviews so a focus group would represent inconsistent data collection. Second, the participants were already familiar with each other, both in terms of personal history and views on education, which may have affected the potential of a focus group to shed light on the process of meaning-making. And finally, many of the advantages of focus groups, such as the group context facilitating personal disclosure and the interaction between participants (Wilkinson 2008) can be preserved within a semi-structured group interview with the addition that the researcher as interviewer has a greater ability to explore individual experience than they would in the role of focus group facilitator.

The interview schedule for the group interviews with the home educated young adults was an adaptation of the schedule developed in case a parent participant offered the opportunity for the author to interview their child. The three subject areas (What is home education like for you?; Mainstream School; and Reflection) were all equally relevant to the past experience of the young people interviewed. The group interview was split over two evenings with an interval of one week between them, allowing the author to listen to the recording of the first session and consider which areas deserved further exploration with each participant.

3.5   Procedure

3.5.1   Data Collection

Once permission was obtained, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The parents were interviewed separately, apart from participants D and H who are partners and chose to be interviewed together. The young people who had been home educated were interviewed as a group. Email and phone contact with the participants was initiated prior to the interview to give the participants the opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns. Once the interview began,the author made sure each participant was comfortable, and talked through the permission form again. Although the schedule was used in each interview, all of the participants were eager to share their experience and began to tell their stories without any prompting. The schedule was still used as a guide, but mostly questions were used to probe into subjects raised by the participants, or to clarify understanding of what each had shared. Each interview lasted between an hour and ninety minutes, apart from the group interview with the young adults which consisted of two conversations of three hours' duration each.

3.5.2   Data Analysis

3.5.2.1   Process of Thematic Analysis

The process of identifying themes in thematic analysis can follow one of two routes: following a deductive (top down) approach or an inductive (bottom up) approach (Braun & Clarke 2006). Although a focus of this research is social development the selected route for this research was inductive, meaning that the process of coding and analysis was "strongly linked to the data" rather than the theoretical interest of the author (Braun & Clarke 2006, p83).

The data was analysed using a Thematic Analysis based on Braun and Clarke's 6-phase process as a guide (Braun & Clarke 2006):

Phase 1: familiarising yourself with your data

Ideally, the first stage of familiarisation would begin with transcribing each recording into a verbatim record. Where an interview had been transcribed by the service, the transcript was carefully compared to the original recording to ensure fidelity. During the initial exposure to the transcript (either actual transcription or checking the transcript), initial ideas about codes and themes were noted.

Phase 2: generating initial codes

Once the transcription was complete, each transcript was marked with initial codes. Codes "identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p88). These codes were theory-driven, in that they were generated with the research questions in mind, but qualitative data is open to a range of interpretations so care was taken to ensure the initial codes were faithful to the data and 'descriptive' in nature (Miles & Huberman 1994).

Once a comprehensive list of codes had been reached, each transcript was marked with 'interpretive' codes (Miles & Huberman 1994). A record was kept of each time a code was applied, including how many times each code was used in each transcript.

Phase 3: searching for themes

Having fully coded the transcripts, a process of consolidation was used to combine codes that were too similar, and a process of pruning removed codes that were not adequately represented across the sample. The refined list of codes was transferred to post-it notes to facilitate the process of sorting and rearranging them into themes. This process resulted in five main themes, which at that stage were labelled Child, Parent, Social Experience, Learning and Relationships.

Phase 4: reviewing themes

The framework of the initial thematic map was used as a starting point to reconsider the relevance of codes. Each code was looked at in detail to decide whether it identified a pattern across the interviews and so formed part of a representative theme. Codes which occurred only occasionally or appeared in only one or two interviews were excluded. The ones that remained were recombined into a new thematic map. There were some codes that could not definitively be placed within one theme, so in consideration of the subjective nature of the process, a separate second thematic map was constructed to offer an alternative interpretation. After careful consideration, the second thematic map was selected as the themes for the findings. This consisted of three over-arching themes, which at that time were named Child Experience, Parent Experience and Learning.

Phase 5: defining and naming themes

Braun and Clarke describe the objective of this phase as to "identify the essence of what each theme is about" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p92). In practice, it proved necessary to proceed with

'working titles' for the sub-themes and the themes, and to combine this phase with the final phase to explore the meaning, and therefore the definition, of the themes.

Phase 6: writing the report

The final phase was writing this report. The working titles for themes and sub-themes were revisited for each draft, and the editing process helped bring clarity to the content of the sub-themes, enabling more precise definitions and names.

3.5.2.2   Validity

The validity of the codes and themes were assessed through a process of peer-review. Un-coded transcript extracts were provided to a peer, who applied their own descriptors of content. These descriptors were compared with the author's coding. The peer descriptors did not contradict the coding system applied, but highlighted areas of opacity in definition of themes such as freedom and discipline. The peer descriptors were useful in refining working definitions of codes and themes, although some areas of uncertainty persisted, and are addressed in the findings.

The initial design of the research project included the sharing of the findings and the discussion points with interview participants. Unfortunately, the logistics of recruitment, interviewing and transcription meant that this was not possible.

3.6   Ethics

3.6.1   Anonymity

The principle ethical considerations for this study were ensuring anonymity of participants, and ensuring that the questions were as open as possible to minimise the influence of the author's views on the answers given (see Appendix B). Anonymity was maintained by removing all potentially identifying information (such as names of people, names of

institutions, etc.) from the transcript. Anonymised transcripts were sent to participants for approval, and all requested changes were made.

3.6.2   Data Protection

The interviews were recorded on a digital recorder. The recordings were transferred to a password-protected external hard drive and backed-up on a password-protected home PC. Transcribing by the author took place on the home PC. Recordings transcribed by the Transcription Service were transferred using the password-protected external hard drive, and all copies of recordings and transcripts held by the service were deleted once the process was complete. All transcripts were anonymised as soon as each transcription was complete, and only anonymised transcripts were printed and used for analysis.

3.6.3   Safeguarding

Although no safeguarding concerns were raised during the research process, the established protocol was that the author would have informed the supervisory panel and then followed the appropriate procedure for the relevant Local Authority. Records would have been kept of all relevant actions and communication.

3.7   Transparency

As referenced earlier, robust qualitative research requires reflexive consideration of the author's assumptions both prior to commencing interviews, and as an ongoing process throughout the research (Yardley 2008). In the spirit of transparency, the author recorded brief notes on the assumptions and opinions that were present immediately prior to the period of data gathering:

- I want to raise the profile of home education as a valid alternative approach to education. I believe that the common position of assuming the normalcy of mainstream education and

marginalising home education hinders a healthy inspiration for reflection of educational practice.

- I am curious as to whether trained educators and a common curriculum are made necessary by methods of mass quantitative assessment that are valued over any qualitative assessment of learning. I think that mainstream education become over-focused on outcomes instead of process, perhaps making home education one of the few options for a process-driven education.

- I am concerned that there is an inherent risk in professionals such as EPs, unaware of their mainstream paradigm, imposing inappropriate frameworks on the delicate ecosystem created by home educators who have worked hard to provide their children with an education fundamentally different to what those professionals themselves grew up in and then trained in. Is it possible to conceive of ways for engaging with home education that support the process rather than attempt to assimilate the process into a mainstream conceptualisation of education? What are the ethical considerations of allowing parents to control this process for their own children compared with the considerations of denying families the opportunity to define education for themselves?

- Since starting out on this research, I have been influenced by Meighan's exploration of the authoritarian learning system that operates in the UK (Meighan 2005), and the pedagogy of power through bullying that infuses each level of the school system and its regulation.

These opinions will be revisited in the Discussion, both in terms of the impact that the findings of the research have had on them, as well as how they may have influenced the research itself.

4   Findings

This chapter presents the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes that arose from the thematic analysis of the eight sets of interviews with home-educating parents and home educated young adults. The analysis was carried out using an inductive approach, although the process was influenced by the research questions. The process of code selection and grouping into themes was not linear, but involved an iterative reflexive process where the influence of the researcher's opinions and the research questions was explored and questioned. During this stage of research, several potential themes were identified and subsequently abandoned as being not sufficiently supported across the data.

The analysis resulted in three super-ordinate or over-arching themes: Child's Experience; Parental Experience and Learning, which comprised of nine themes and 21 sub-ordinate themes (see Figure 1 on the next page). The process of establishing the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of these themes was complex, and is addressed in the next chapter.

As previously stated, the participants in this study fall into two categories; home-educating parents (participants A – H), and home educated young adults (participants W – Z). In this section, the word *participants* is used to denote a group of participants comprising a mixture of parents and young people. For instances where a sub-theme or perspective applies exclusively to one group, the group will be named explicitly.

For the purpose of clarity, the term "Home Edders" is used to refer to young people who have been home educated (it does not imply that the young person has never attended school). The author was introduced to the term by the young adults who had been home educated. The term 'school-educated' refers to young people who have not been home educated at any stage (it does not refer to Home Edders who have attended school, even if the period of home education was short). The author acknowledges that useful distinctions could be drawn

between different types of school experience, such as mainstream, special, Steiner and

Montessori schools, but it would not have been possible to explore these distinctions within

the present study, and the necessary clarifications to participant's definitions of 'school' were

not sought during interviews.

Whilst every effort has been made to illustrate sub-themes with the words of the participants,

selecting meaningful extracts was challenging as many coded references only made sense in

the context of broad sections of the interview.

Figure 1: Thematic Map
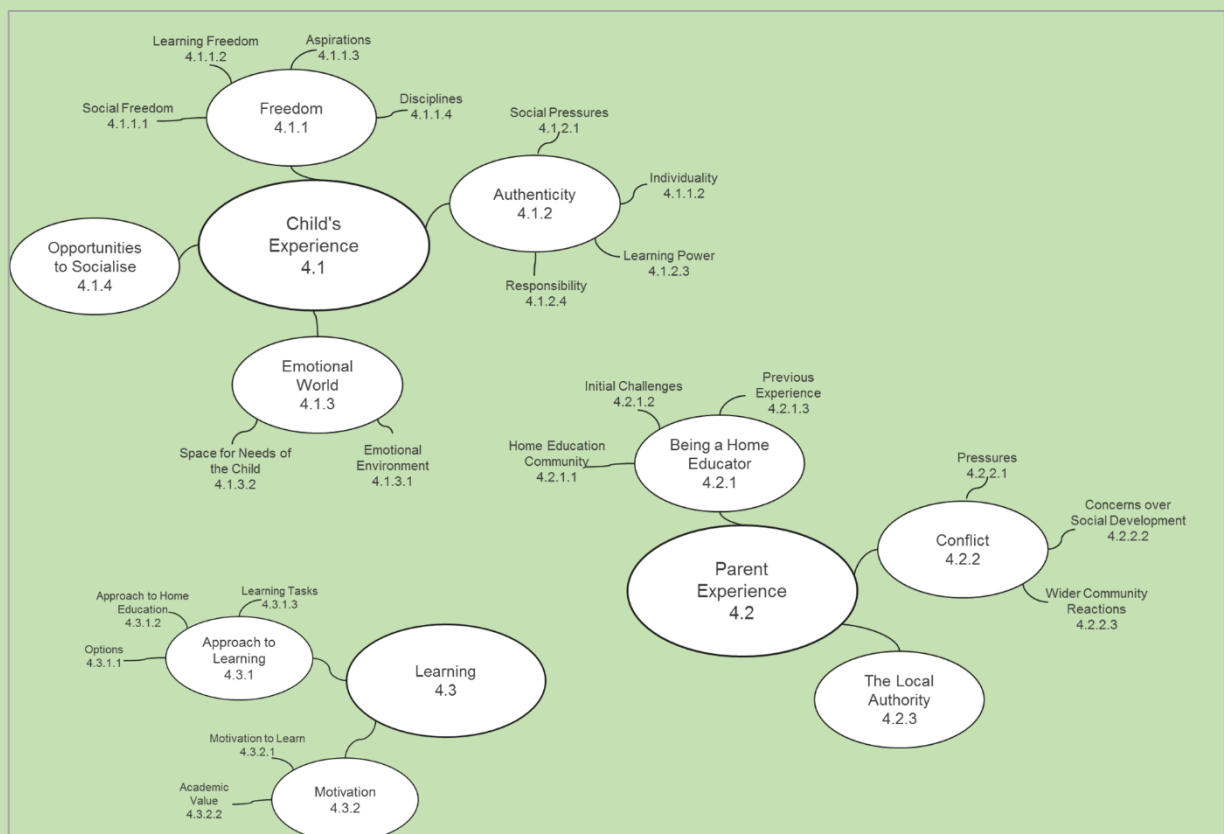
4.1   Child's Experience

The child's experience of home education was addressed both from personal experience and

from parents' awareness of their own children's experience. In several instances,

comparisons were drawn between home education experience and that in school. Four main

themes emerged within Child's Experience: Freedom, Authenticity, Emotional World and Social Opportunities.

4.1.1   Freedom

Participants discussed the significance of freedom to the child's overall experience of home education, in terms of social freedom, learning freedom, aspirations and discipline.

4.1.1.1   Social Freedom

Participants discussed the impact that freedom has on the social lives of home educated children. A recurrent subject was the freedom to choose when to engage in social activity. For example, participant D commented that:

 "I'll say there's a (mentions home education group), which is a home education group that we go to, do you want to go or not, and sometimes he'll say yeah yeah yeah let's go, and other times he just wants to chill out and play Lego, you know. I think your child is a very good kind of barometer".

Participant F discussed how withdrawing from school had given their son some much-needed control over the quantity and timing of his social interactions, and observed that:

"If you're registered to go to school you have to go to school every day, five days a week and be there all day and you don't get any really time on your own, it's like all or nothing."

The effect of this freedom was noted by participant E, who described the way their children used their self-awareness to choose their level of social engagement:

"it's knowing they've got a choice and being able to recognise in themselves the symptoms of when it's too much. Because (younger son) especially, he, when there's too many people and too much sensory stimulation, you know, when it's

really noisy and, yeah, when there's a lot of people, you know, it just wipes him out, you know, so he can, with how it is now he can choose when to engage with that.".

4.1.1.2   Learning Freedom

Freedom within learning was a recurrent theme amongst participants. Initially this sub-theme was included within the over-arching theme of learning, but essentially this theme is about how the learning is a consequence of the freedom rather than learning as the impetus for freedom. Several parents expressed the tension they felt initially at allowing the freedom. For example, participant G reflected on how the learning value of the freedom was not initially apparent:

"there's been a lot of saying oh my god they're not doing anything. But then my younger two were so into Lego for a while and they would build all these amazing Lego structures and they would have all these games and these games went on for weeks, months sometimes, you know, characters and stuff, and I didn't really think of that as learning, when I look back now it's like oh my god of course it is, it's storytelling, it's creativity and it's building and it's all that sort of spatial stuff that they talk about with the Lego and at the time I definitely didn't think of it as that, it was like they were just playing"

The concept of learning arising from 'just playing' was a common experience to the parents. Amongst the Home Edders, the importance of freedom was most keenly felt when under threat. Participant W talked about the change to the free structure of his learning when, in preparation for studying for GCSEs he was expected to engage with study books:

"it was really light work so the freedom of my home education was not practically lost, though to me it was a huge deal [laughs] you know, that sudden imposition I was not too pleased with"

4.1.1.3   Aspirations

Although alluded to by several parents, aspirations were of more interest to the Home Edders than the educators. In particular, reference was made to how the freedom of home education nurtured aspirations. As participant W summarised:

"when you're at school you're doing the school thing, that's your daily life, right, you're consumed by it, when you're home ed and you're not doing anything in particular and you're not dedicating your time to a routine or anything, you have room to dream, right, to kind of imagine yourself, like oh, what am I going to do"

4.1.1.4   Discipline

Whilst participants differed in their explanations, there was agreement that discipline in home education groups is more organic and collaborative in home education than in school. In fact, Participant B commented on her initial reaction to an approach taken by another parent at a HE group gathering early on in her HE experience:

"I can remember when I first started home educating there was this dad, there were two boys fighting, I think they were about 12, and one of the dads of the boys, one of the boys, he walked really slowly across the green, and I thought oh my god, they're going to kill each other by the time he gets there, but he walked really slowly to let them try and sort it out themselves. I didn't appreciate that until a few years later, I thought oh what have I done, these home ed families are weird [laughs]. But I can see why he did it, because they would just let boys be boys and, but not kill each other".

Participant X summed-up an aspect of discipline described by several of the home educated young adults by saying:

"not only is it that the, I don't want to say punishments - a lot of the time there's not a punishment - but not only is the response for their misdoing tailored to them because

it's their parent, but also it's something that's coming from someone they're invested

in. Someone they know is invested in them and someone who is going to be with

them outside of the meeting".

Participant X also compared processes of dealing with bullying in school and in HE groups:

"the kids for the most part didn't do any bullying because anything like that that

happened, it just got resolved… Whereas if you're getting bullied by say two kids at

school and it's two on one, and you say 'so and so hit me', and they go 'no teacher,

no, it's the opposite way around'… and because there's two of them versus one of

you, the teacher can't really do anything, they've got no idea".

4.1.2   Authenticity

The process of children developing into authentic people was significant for all the

participants, although the participants rarely used the words authenticity or authentic. In fact,

the theme was most clearly expressed with reference to the perceived lack of authenticity

within the school-educated population. Parent participants generally made observations based

on the age of their child/children. The boundaries between the sub-themes within this theme

(Social Pressures; Individuality; Learning Power; and Responsibility) were difficult to

manage because they are inter-related. For example, Individuality was a significant factor in

how individual children managed Social Pressure. However, the author chose to maintain

them separately instead of amalgamating them as they offer important contrasts between the

participants' perceptions of school experience and HE experience.

4.1.2.1   Social Pressures

Participants were open about the social pressures that children face, both in school and in

home education. Pressures took many forms. For example, Participant C talked about the

need for balance when navigating the options for social contact:

"We try to make it so that we're not seeing people every day because it can become pretty tiring and you never get anything done at all".

Participant A spoke about the experience of watching the children learn to resolve conflict in social situations:

"sometimes they can be quite fraught as well, then you, new children coming in all the time and the, they've got to work it all out among themselves a little bit as well, which is a part as well, I suppose, of socialisation".

Participant Y compared personal experience of forming social groups in HE groups to forming them in school:

"In a home ed environment it was, I think it was more relaxed for everyone involved because everyone had a different background, everyone was coming from a place of not knowing exactly how anyone they interact with is going to function, so everyone has to learn the terms of engagement and everyone has more freedom to establish those terms openly rather than having them taken for granted".

All of the home educated young adults talked about the difference between how they experienced taking formal exams (such as G.C.S.E.s) and the experience they observed in the school-educated young people taking the exams with them. Participant X spoke for the group:

"in a school class you get conformity and you get a group hysteria about things… if you've come all the way through hearing about exams, preparing for exams, hearing about so and so's sister fainted and got taken out, like every year in secondary school you see the ambulances coming to take away the fallen, and everyone talks about it, and if you're not in on that you're in the out group. You can't say I'm completely chilled about this or the entire rest of the class will look at you as some kind of pariah who must be a psychopath or something".

4.1.2.2   Individuality

The participants talked about authenticity in terms of how it manifests in Home Edders.

Several parents talked about how their children demonstrated the ability to make independent

choices when socialising. For example, participant G spoke about her son's social experience

when attending College, specifically the behaviour of his classmates at social gatherings:

"They're all quite intent in getting out of their faces, and he says he tried a little bit of

that when he kind of got involved first and he's like ah, not really interested in that.

And when they sort of start crying, he ends up being the person who looks after

everybody, and so now it's like 'do I really want to be the one holding back the hair

when somebody's being sick and helping somebody get home? Not really, nah, I'm

not coming"

Participant H drew on his experience as a mainstream school teacher when discussing how

authenticity is affected by experiences at school:

"Cause they, cause it develops your persona at school where you're with other

children, all your emphasis goes into your persona, how you're perceived by others,

are you wearing the right stuff, are you saying the right things".

Participant W echoed this thought and reflected that Home Edders are more likely to be

authentic:

"not because they're special in some way, I don't believe that, but because they have

been not designed, but put through a process that's… it's not quite individualising,

it's not homogenising".

4.1.2.3   Learning Power

Authenticity in the learning experience was a significant theme with the participants, both as

an effective motivator (discussed later), and as an important experience for the child.

Participant C expressed Learning Power in terms of her daughter's ability to follow through on decisions as a result of home education:

"she (daughter)'s got some level of choice as to what she's doing, and that, what I've found being one of the most important things for her to gain confidence really is making her own decisions and then doing them".

Participant C contrasted this with her daughter's experience at school:

"she's never been allowed to just run with something at school because the thing, she used to complain all the time about how she was writing a story or doing a project or something and she wasn't allowed to finish it, and she used to say that to me frequently when she was at school, even when school was good and she was enjoying it. She was like ah, I was doing this thing and then we had to stop and we had to do something else".

This theme was summed up by Participant W, who was reflecting on the expectations placed on pupils at school and the lack of control that the pupils have:

"With responsibility, you know that great quote, with great power comes great responsibility, goes both ways. With responsibility should come power. If someone dumps responsibility on you but doesn't give you any power with it, it's like this isn't fair".

4.1.2.4   Responsibility

Following on from the comment by Participant W, the opportunities for authentic responsibility in home education was a significant theme for participants. A unifying factor was that young people respond well to authentic responsibility, and often rise to the challenge. Participant B echoed several participants when talking about HE group gatherings in general:

"one of the key things that I found with the children socialising, you find the older ones always take care of the younger ones, and then when the younger ones get bigger they take care of the younger ones".

The authenticity of domestic responsibility was also a common experience. For example, Participant E said of her son:

"he runs the household, and those, there's something about those skills, and he doesn't have to, you know, he doesn't feel he's forced to, but it's his choice"

4.1.3   Emotional World

All participants regarded the emotional world of home education as being a key element, although it was often more of an implicit thread running through the fabric of the interviews than a crystalised element.

4.1.3.1   Emotional Environment

There is no definitive emotional environment of home education, and in fact several participants seemed to frame it in contrast to how they perceived the emotional environment of school. Participant E spoke for several parents:

"I think some children come out of school though because they don't cope well in those social situations, you know, it might be that academically they're fine but I've definitely heard of children where they just don't, it's just too much for them, you know, just in terms of the, I mean school is incredibly chaotic".

Participant H was more explicit when describing how young people in a school where he was teaching reacted to a situation which resulted in one of their peers needing to be physically restrained:

"I was like 'this is bizarre', because no one was saying anything - they'd been trained not to respond to it. But then at lunchtime a few of the girls broke down in tears, but it

was very hushed up, they were taken into a corner, had a little discussion going on.

But everyone in there must have been affected by that, but you know, they weren't

allowed to kind of acknowledge you know, acknowledge, you know, and if it is

kicking off every single day, these kids are going to be traumatised. It just doesn't

seem to be, I guess you can argue that this is like, this is reality, you shouldn't

protect your child too much because they're going to be dealing with it anyway, but

maybe that time can come later, you know?"

Participant E shared how the emotional environment she sought to create for her children was

influenced by her personal process of seeking a healthy emotional environment:

"for me the massive healing was to be able to live in natural time, you know, so it's

the kind of earth and seasons and my interaction with that. And that's what the boys,

you know, so the boys have been able to do that at a much earlier age".

4.1.3.2   Space for Needs of the Child

This theme emerged clearly and consistently across the parent participants, who all talked

about prioritising the needs of the child. Participant B emphasised the importance of not

forcing children to try things before they are ready:

"it's giving the child space until they're ready, and then they'll do it".

Participant F talked about the importance of space for helping her son to recover from the

negative experiences he had at school:

"I think allowing him just to be, not pushing him to keep doing things, either sort of

mentally or physically, just letting him rest, be around the house, to relax, to, to re,

you know, find his sense of self and become centred as a person again".

Participant E referred to the absence of space for the child in her son's reception class:

"what I did see happen is that he went up to the teacher to speak to her and she, she

was, you know, he was right in front of her and she totally ignored him and looked

over his head, you know. And that wasn't the only time that had happened… he said

that this was really frequent".

4.1.4   Opportunities to Socialise

The most common comment amongst participants about opportunities to socialise in home

education was about the ability to spend time with children of different ages. Most of the

parents commented on the positive impact of this aspect. Participant W described the

experience:

"there were kids who were much older than me… who I could look up to and enjoy

the fact that, that they would, you know, be my equal and that felt good. But then

after that I was the oldest and I got to experience that from the other side, that it was

nice to be looked up to and have like the little kids all coming and being like oh, can

you help me with this or I want to show you this".

Several participants talked about the nature of interaction between Home Edders and adults

as being more balanced and healthy than the dynamics often evident in school interactions.

Participant X talked about how this contributed to Home Edders developing a more

constructive relationship with tutors at College than their school-educated peers:

"I think it's partly to do with being home educated because you engage with them like

human beings because you hang out with adults more".

Participant C noted a significant positive change in how her daughter engaged with adults as

a result of withdrawing from school and commencing home education:

"She's started to talk to adults as if they're just other people, strangers as well, she'll

just ask them questions outright, and she never used to do that, and I don't think that

is just an age thing, I think that really is something that she can just, I think that really

is a change of how she perceives adults to be".

Most of the participants expressed a concern over the social opportunities available in school. Participant D commented:

"I don't think kids are in school, I don't think they're there, well they're not there to socialise, but they get a break in the morning and a break at lunch and all they do is just they sort of expel all that energy out because they've been cooped up in a classroom for hours on end".

Not all the parents were completely comfortable with their children's social experience of home education. Participant E talked about how her sons had not formed friendships in the way the family had hoped they would, although she indicated that this was an unusual situation within HE:

"And I think that's something that, you know, I wouldn't say that that would be a general experience of the home ed community, I think… we certainly haven't isolated ourselves from people, but we don't seem to make the friendships or social friendships in the way that a lot of people seem to".

4.2   Parent Experience

The second over-arching theme, Parent Experience, contains sub-themes mainly of relevance to the parent participants, although the home educated young adults did offer some useful insights. Parent Experience comprises of the following themes: Being a Home Educator; Conflict and The Local Authority.

4.2.1   Being a Home Educator

The home education story of most of the parent participants was centred upon the needs and experience of their child or children. Nevertheless, many aspects of their own experience were evident. The experience of being a home educator breaks down into three sub-themes: home education Community; Initial Challenges; and Previous Experiences.

4.2.1.1   Home Education Community

All the participants were positive about the home education community as a whole, and the

parent participants made many comments such as Participant D:

"the homeschool community is very positive and very supportive".

Participant B felt that HE Communities did not need support from Local Authorities:

"I think we tend to take care of ourselves".

As well as positive and supportive, participants commented on the inclusive atmosphere of

groups. Participant G said:

"I've been quite impressed really at the level of, it's not even tolerance, it's more than

tolerance, it's acceptance of all the different ways of being. It seems to be, it seems

to be just accepted that if somebody's struggling then there's not really, doesn't

seem to be any judgement".

The culture of inclusivity and diversity was also evident in responses from within the HE

community to a group of Home Edders who organised a protest against the Badman Report

of 2009 (which proposed 'Draconian' registration and monitoring of HE). Participant Y

recalled:

"the fact that we called ourselves the Home Educated Youth Council, we did get one

or two emails from home educators who weren't linked into the same network or just

hadn't been there to be involved saying 'you shouldn't call yourself this, you're not

representing me'. I don't even know if they were on, generally agreeing with our

goals or not".

4.2.1.2   Initial Challenges

The parents experienced some difference in their initial challenges. A consistent experience

was an initial lack of confidence over whether the parent was taking the right approach to

home education. Even Participant E, who experienced relief rather than pressure at the commencement of home education, eventually succumbed to this self-doubt:

"so that pressure, like I said it manifested in terms of, you know, you're not doing enough. So, yeah, I think I'd really, I'd be very critical of my presence and my, and my, yeah, my presence with the boys at that time".

The lack of confidence impacted on choices around how parents spent their educative time with their children. For example, participant C reflected that:

"I genuinely wish that we'd done absolutely nothing apart from enjoyed ourselves for a bit longer, I really do, because I think that would have taken all the stress away from the situation, and you know, nothing academic, things that we wanted to do, things that are still learning but they're not writing, not that, just for longer, just for a bit longer".

4.2.1.3   Previous Experience

The most common previous experience for parent participants was their own time at school. Whilst often blended with indirect experience of their own children or children of family and friends, sometimes the influence of personal school experience became apparent. For example, participant G said:

"remembering my own experience of school and sometimes sitting there in class thinking this is like torture because I am not interested in this, and feeling quite kind of like squished down myself, so that was, I just didn't want that for my own kids".

In some cases, the process of deciding to home educate involved significant experience of school. Participant F described a protracted process of having her concerns recognised and addressed by her son's school, resulting in decisive delays in him receiving appropriate support:

"it came to their attention that there was something very wrong, and of course prior to that I'd been trying to tell them that there was something wrong and they needed to do something different … they didn't really appreciate until that point that the problem was bigger than they realised. And then of course after that they wanted to pass it back to the family, saying something must be wrong at home for my son to be in this state. So that was the delay again, we had a gentleman called a parents' support adviser, he came round and visited in person and asked me lots of questions and filled in forms, and (son's name) was referred to counselling for one, and we had to wait for months, and then that first, it only took the counsellor person a few minutes to realise that it wasn't appropriate, that it wasn't what my son needed [laughs] and everything was on hold for those months because this was the route the school took in this kind of situation. So yeah, and then during all this time (son's name) was just going downhill really, his physical health was getting really bad, he wasn't sleeping, he wasn't eating, he was exhausted".

Participant B was alone amongst the parent participant in having been introduced to home education by her child's school during a meeting about her daughter being categorised as 'Gifted and Talented':

"I said well what do I do, how can I make sure that her needs are met, and she said the best thing to do is to home educate, just send her to Brownies and clubs just to socialise with her friends".

Some personal experiences were less common, such as Participant C who reflected on the influence of her own experience as a Home Edder:

"our interests just sort of slowly built up, and we used to do projects that went on for absolutely ages and we'd get really interested in a certain thing… I was completely obsessed with foxes and I used to write stories about them that went on for days and

days and days [laughs] a ridiculously long amount of time, and I think, yeah, my expectations were, foolishly, I really think it was foolish now, was that she would have these interests as well and that she would just do the same thing".

Similarly, Participant H has less common previous (and concurrent) experiences of teaching influencing him:

"the class I teach now, primary school, I spend 80% of my time, 90% of my time with a handful of kids who are naughty, and you've got a huge number in the class who are clever, sensitive, decent individuals that I can't, I find it very hard to get to those guys. That's not just me, I'm sure that's across all the other teachers I speak to they've got the same dilemma".

4.2.2   Conflict

Conflict as a theme consisted of three sub-themes: Pressures; Concerns over Social Development; and Wider Community Reactions.

4.2.2.1   Pressures

HE parents can experience a variety of pressures that persist beyond the initial stages of home education. Indeed, some pressures manifest before the commencement of home education. For example, several parents talked about how friends and members of their own family disagreed with, and sometimes even objected to, the decision to home educate. Participant F described the experience of managing strong disagreement from education professionals, who she had previously regarded as having 'superior' judgement:

"I had the right take on the situation - school wasn't the right environment for my children at that point in time. It was making them very stressed and unwell, it was like a quite sensible thing to do really. But kind of prior to the time I took them out, people

were, professional people who, you know, you think that they're experts don't you, by what they do, so what they tell you has got to be somehow superior to your own judgement. And in the past I would have been swayed by somebody else's opinion. I'd been quite easily influenced shall we say. But I held firm in all of this because I knew, you know, I mean I take my parental responsibilities very seriously and if nothing else I'm here now to keep my children safe and well. And I didn't, even though I was feeling very wobbly in myself, I didn't doubt that I was right and I had to push this".

Whilst some parents were explicit about challenges relating to the time and effort required for home education, it was more common for this pressure to become apparent through small comments, such as Participant E:

"there was no downtime - it's still like that actually".

Participant C discussed how having twins after commencing HE had impacted on the attention available for some HE activities:

"it was before we had the twins as well so they were really great and I would really give my, all my time and my attention on those days out".

Whilst actual experience with Local Authorities is addressed later, the pressure experienced by HE parents in anticipation of exchanges with their LA was a separate theme. The expectation of judgement created pressure for some parents, as participant C said:

"you can see that you would want to really show that you were doing a good job, otherwise they might try and send your kids back to school or something, I think that's people's fear, isn't it?...Not providing a sufficient education, that's people's fear, isn't it, that they're going to get that letter and that then obviously leads on to other things. And I don't think anyone's really aware of what would happen if that happens really, I think it rarely does to be honest, not anyone I've spoken to anyway".

4.2.2.2   Concerns over Social Development

Concerns over social development was perhaps a predictable theme, given the ongoing concern expressed in home education research and the outcome of the author's pilot study. Participant W confirmed the ongoing interest exhibited by the general public in the social experience of Home Edders:

"you can almost predict the set of questions that will come at you when you say to someone that you are or were home educated. They'll always ask you like how did you find socialisation, did you have many friends?".

Several parent participants shared personal concerns that they had had over the social development of their home educated children. Participant G talked about readjusting her expectations in the light of her children's preferences:

"I had an idea that they should have a big group of friends, that they should be setting out that idea that they should be part of a home education group that's kind of a big circle of friends, but really the feedback from the kids has not really panned out that way".

Participant A   spoke about the experience of witnessing his children face social challenges:

"obviously, there are moments that aren't quite pleasant to watch when they're having a hard time, and that's kind of tough cause you're there, you see everything, whereas the alternative you see nothing [laughs] so you've got to take your choices haven't you, so being in either position's tough I think".

In both of these cases, as in the majority of parent participant concerns, the parents felt that the social issues within the communities they were familiar with were either transitory (such as initial isolation after leaving school and the associated social network), or arose from the need to adjust expectations and perspective.

Some participant parents expressed some exasperation at the notion that home education could mean isolation for the children. Participant C shared:

"that's the one thing that really gets me when people worry about social life with a child that's not at school [laughs]… it's the last of my worries I think, more than anything I'm trying to rein it in a bit so we can actually do some stuff".

Participant E spoke for many of the parent participants when she expressed her emotional response to the question of social development in home education being raised by someone outside the HE community:

"my human, my instinctive response as a human being is to feel quite threatened by that (the question of social development in HE), and we, you know, this is what we're used to, coming up a lot with the Labour government just before, the last Labour government finished, Ed Balls trying to outlaw home ed…".

Some of the parent participants who had removed their children from school commented on their concerns over social development within the school environment. Participant H was drawing on experience as a teacher when reflecting that:

"we've decided en masse to push children together by age. So where they attack homeschoolers for not having social experience, surely children in the mainstream having limited social experience by just being with each other and being spoken, told what to do by one inauthentic adult in a role - it doesn't seem to have much real life significance".

Participant D was concerned with the social development of relations who were emerging from the school system:

"when we look at our nieces and nephews that are coming out of school, they are not social beings. They do not communicate and they cannot socialise with other people. Whereas I see these home education children of all ages, from, you know, from birth

until there's one girl that I know who's about 16, and socially they are amazing, they can talk to everybody in the room about something. They just have that confidence of talking to people".

The final comment in this section goes to Participant E, who reframed her initial reaction to the question of social development by questioning the origin of concern felt by people who are so concerned:

"my human response if you like is to, is to be threatened by it, but my kind of more secure response would be to reflect it back and say what are you so scared of, not you but the person, the questioner, what are you so scared of?".

4.2.2.3   Wider Community Reactions

Although most parent participants talked about a mix of reactions from the wider community, there was a common theme of their decision not being accepted by at least some of their friends and family. Participant B talked about facing criticism from friends and even losing friends over the decision:

"I did lose some friends and I feel it was because they thought well the school is good enough for my child, but it's not good enough for your child. So I did find out who my true friends were quickly, you just develop a thick skin and you have to be quietly determined because you can't be, I never criticise friends' decisions to keep their children in school, but they felt they had the right to criticise me for taking my child out."

Participant G experienced similar responses, but having recently relocated the wider community reaction resulted in obstacles to developing a social and support network rather than significant change and reduction of an existing network:

"Probably the hardest thing was moving in an area and trying to meet new people… who had just put their kids in school, and the not being understood as to why you

would choose this option, particularly when it's like a small village school, you should

be supporting it, that kind of thing. That was probably the hardest thing of all, feeling

quite ... alienated because we hadn't taken part".

Participant H talked about listening to disenfranchised teachers who hold a low opinion of the

school system, but are not open to the idea of home education:

"there's a lot of teachers complaining about the way things are, they're complaining

about these children who have these severe issues. There's teachers complaining

about the workload, the restrictions they have, but then they can't seem to make the

connection - they'll still criticise homeschooling. There's almost fear, fear of stepping

out of the mainstream".

4.2.3   The Local Authority

The theme of relationship with the Local Authority was anticipated, having proved

significant in the pilot study. At its most fundamental level, the concern was summarised by

Participant X:

"I think one of the fears, one of the reasons home edders don't want to be known to

their local authority is they don't want someone to make them to send their child to

school".

The concern over LA monitoring was summed up by Participant A:

"people fear that they don't understand home education, they'll walk into your home

and they'll expect everyone to be sat there with their textbooks. You're not emulating

a school at home, and some people generally have genuine concerns to show how

are these children learning anything".

Concerns over LA reaction are often not borne out by experience. In fact, some interactions

were supportive and enabling rather than threatening and disruptive. Participant F shared a

positive experience:

"I suppose somehow I expected somebody to say no you can't do that, or we're not going to let you… I was very anxious about that, being allowed to do that by the authorities. I didn't really have any experience of it, I'd known nobody who home educated in any situation, so I didn't really feel assured of my rights. I felt that I really would have to state my case, you know, almost like you might in a court of law. But I didn't to be honest - in fact it was accepted. When we had our first visit from the, the home education department, the lady who came, we were living in (mentions region), and the lady who came, she was lovely, she was absolutely fantastic, and of course she told us all about this sort of stuff and what support there is, or there was round there. She was the first person who was completely on our side".

Whilst not negative, Participant C did not find the LA HE Representative to be any help at all and was instead a neutral presence supporting the assumption that the LA was not a resource:

"She said that there was some information we could look at I think on a website, but there isn't actually anything there. And I didn't really feel she had the resources to (help) at all".

Participant B was alone amongst the participants in having had direct experience of confrontation with a Local Authority. Alerted by another parent in her HE group to a new LA approach to monitoring, Participant B was involved in resolving the issue:

"so the pair of us, we had meetings with (names local authority), and we managed to, to calm them down. They'd started to knock on doors to say "are you home educating?". They were, they were working outside the law. They didn't have the power to do what they were doing so we just had to set them straight".

The home educated young adults discussed constructive ways to improve the general

relationship between Local Authorities and the HE community. Participant Y concluded:

"to the extent that you need home educators to be interacting with the authorities, you need the authorities to know what they're doing, because loads of local authorities don't have even one person dedicated to dealing with home ed. It's various different people who, who sort of have that shared responsibility in a very badly-defined way. There's no one in central government who's dedicated to dealing with it, and that's quite a problem because it means that no one knows whose responsibility it is to deal with it. No one knows whose responsibility it is to get trained to deal with it or to provide training for their people to deal with it, so… if they don't even know if their job is supposed to involve safeguarding home edders or looking after their educational outcomes, then from the perspective of the LA or the, the government, whoever's inquiring into how the LA's doing, you wouldn't expect them to have any ability to provide that service. And from the perspective of the home edders, as (Participant X) is saying, it makes you extremely distrustful".

4.3   Learning

The over-arching theme Learning only comprises of two main themes: Approach to Learning; and Motivation. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this as indicating that learning is of less significance than the other themes. Both the main themes were well represented, and the constituent codes infused a broad range of topics within each interview.

4.3.1   Approach to Learning

The theme of Approach to Learning was formed of the sub-themes Options; Approach to home education; and Learning Tasks.

4.3.1.1   Options

The HE experience can involve a range of options. Participants talked about a variety of learning opportunities not available to mainstream school, such as regular attendance at forest school, Steiner School and outdoor activity learning. Participants also talked about the range of options regarding college courses and qualifications. The theme of options relates not to the options themselves, but the effects of exploring, selecting and reflecting on the options not usually available to school-educated young people.

Participant Y felt that learning to consider and negotiate options gave Home Edders important skills in considering alternatives to the perceived "one true path" of school followed by an undergraduate degree:

"I think that the people who do other qualifications or drop out of academia are in a similar situation to home educators, in that we've got the, it's treated as a default system, you do school, GCSEs, A levels, maybe a degree. And we, we're lucky we have some other qualifications we can do but if you, if you do a BTEC or an NVQ there's a bit of a stigma around that because the assumption is you weren't good enough to do "proper" qualifications. But whether you do those alternate qualifications or something else entirely, you suddenly have to find your own way. And I think that's part of the stigma, for those different routes comes from the assumption that school is the one true path, and I imagine it's also stressful because of that stigma if you, if you do have to take an alternate route, finding out for yourself, you suddenly have to be a very different kind of person to what you, what everyone expects you to be. And I would guess that it's, it's stressful to suddenly have to find your own way. Whereas that's something, all the alternate routes, they're things that home ed kids are thinking about quite early".

The ability to select from choices permeated the experiences shared by most of the participants, and Participant A expressed it as a core outcome of the HE experience:

"if nothing else comes of it, home educated children are very aware of their choices, so they know that if they choose to go to school or if there's a change and they're in school they know that it's not completely, it's not the only answer that you must go to school. They know that, that school for what it is I suppose… Think 'well, I can get this from home but I can't get this. Well maybe I'll look at a school, and if so which school and what can they deliver for me?'".

4.3.1.2   Approach to Home Education

The approaches to education that the participants deployed were varied, but they all involved being responsive to the needs, interests, and preferences of the child. Participant W described this approach when he commented:

"home life was very very free formed and involved lots of playing about and imagining stuff, creating stuff".

Within the child-led approach, several other principles appeared to be shared. Several parent participants talked about encouraging new activities and areas of learning, such as Participant A:

"you do want to introduce stuff to them and you do think 'oh, he should be doing some music now'' and that is, you think 'ooh, perhaps we'll do this music here', and sometimes it'll take a bit of persuasion to get him to try".

Participant D summarised a common principle:

"That's the key, to nurture that curiosity".

Whilst all the parent participants talked about the value of unstructured learning, some parent participants felt that school-style learning activities had their place as well. Participant F

talked about how using study books helped provide learning structure during the first few months:

"at this time we kind of followed the national curriculum for some subjects quite, quite, not extensively but quite a lot. I purchased a lot of the kind of study books that you can get, you know, for the school courses and that, that were appropriate with my children's ages…. And we actually used quite a lot of them to guide them at this point".

4.3.1.3   Learning Tasks

Participants shared a wide variety of home education learning tasks, including subject tutors; revision books; group learning sessions; subject websites; hobby-based learning; learning through play; and learning through television / online content. The coherent thread through the variety was the importance of exploring ideas and playing with them freely, through conversation, hobbies, and play. Participant A frequently returned to the importance of play on developing learning from other activities:

"they'll still play for hours and hours and hours…, and they will just, you see a lot of other influences coming out in their play and I think that's really important, just to be able to play with ideas and they mainly do that with a lot of imaginative play".

Participant E described how the learning her son gained from horsemanship sessions extended beyond working with horses into deeper realms of interpersonal skills and self-awareness, as well as understanding how the world works:

"And the learning, I mean that's, so it's not a subject, you know, it hasn't got a label, but the learning that's happening… We talk about it afterwards, and it's translating into sort of understanding relationships and all sorts of things as well as this, you know, he's learning about his body and about the way that, you know, the sort of way that energy works, so it really gives him loads of information for his, all that inner

work he does about the way stuff moves and flies and aerodynamics and just the way that everything interacts".

The home educated young adults provided more direct insight into the learning they gained from play. Participant W gave an example of learning concrete, academic skills from game play:

"I was also really interested in games so I'd picked up arithmetic by myself just from…like the rules of, Magic the Gathering is a great example, there's just some, you know, spells to deal damage and you have a health total and you have to, you know how to double or triple something for like attack points. So obviously I learned basic arithmetic really just by osmosis from this kind of thing. And then at ten I picked up coding, ten or 11, I'd started coding with a program called Game Maker, which is a really great program".

Participant W contrasted this experience with school-style learning tasks that he undertook from a GCSE study book, which lacked authenticity because they were contrived:

"English I hated, I hated with a fiery passion because the, it was like … write a letter to a restaurant complaining. But I haven't been to any restaurants recently, I don't have any complaints, how do I do this? I, and yeah, write a news article about this, but it didn't happen, it just wasn't in me so I found it really difficult to do".

There was a clear consensus among the home educated young adults that both the structure and style of what they called school-type learning tasks often made the tasks less enjoyable and effective than the organic, tailored learning tasks they experienced as part of their home education. Participant W summarised the discussion saying:

"and I think school, what it does is it says remember all these things, and then next year it says remember those things? Remember these ones as well. And it sort of starts to build on it but it's kind of like building on, like normally you build a jigsaw

from the corners and the edges and then you fill in where you can see bits that fit, whereas this is more like let's scattergun the whole thing and then let's do it again and see if any bits stick together, and it works in the end because you spend so much more time on it that most kids come out of school basically being able to read and write and add and remember some other stuff for like a year or two afterwards, but it's not fully coherent because you don't get that sort of joined up thinking, especially cross subject thinking".

4.3.2   Motivation

The theme of motivation was formed from sub-ordinate themes Motivation to Learn and Academic Value, which can be thought of as the propellant and the trajectory of the learning experience.

4.3.2.1   Motivation to Learn

Participants all talked about the motivation to learn. Some of the parent participants spoke about how they prioritised nurturing motivation. For example, Participant C said of home education:

"it's not about learning I don't think, I think it's about wanting to learn and enjoying it and keeping that thirst for learning stuff into being an adult".

Participant Y described motivation as coming from having the freedom to choose:

"the other factor is you're doing it for yourself, because you have the option, if you are investing the emotional energy into doing something for yourself you want to get something back from it. If you're forced to do it then it's going to matter less".

Participant D spoke for several parent participants when considering the levels of motivation to learn within school:

"from reception when it's play based to year one when they actually have to sit down and they get homework and things like that, the love of learning disappears - even at the age of five and six".

The difference between motivation to learn in Home Edders and school-educated young people had additional relevance to Home Edders that were attending or had attended college and therefore mixed with young people who had been educated in school. Participant E talked about her son's experience of learning alongside low-motivated school-educated peers:

"he has found it frustrating because a lot of the people that come in from school don't know why they're there, and there's a problem with motivation and suchlike. But I've noticed he's, instead of just, he's quite a cynical person but I've noticed instead of just kind of reacting to it and thinking the world's full of idiots… we talked about it because he's working in a threesome with someone who's really not motivated, so he's now looking at, or he's been looking at different ways to bring this person in, recognising that they're probably not naturally like that - it's just that no one's taken any notice of them before or they've been interested. So, we talked about, you know, different kind of ways of motivating other people".

Participant X felt that school engenders a mindset that is universally-damaging, although to varying degrees:

"I think (the way school motivates people to learn is) damaging psychologically to everyone to some degree, less so to the people who are good at the academic rote learning aspect, but to everyone because it puts you in that mindset of doing these pointless things for arbitrary reasons, for arbitrary and often stupid people, right, and that's, that's not a good mindset".

4.3.2.2   Academic Value

To an extent, this theme is a development of elements discussed in the Learning Tasks theme. In particular, parent participants spoke about reassessing their view of what learning and academia means in the light of their HE experiences. Often, learning was not evident at the time, and generally fell outside of the academic subjects that classify school-based learning. Participant G summed it up:

"it's this idea that when you're scanning for what they, what learning is, it's about also about… forcing myself to expand my idea of what's learning. That's probably one of the biggest challenges in it, because we have this idea of academia. And when it's not academia, it's like 'well, what is it? - it's just not learning at all'. But why not? Because if they're doing something that someone else in the world is actually making a living from then why should I deem it as not?".

The Home Edder Participants extended the reflection on the nature of academic value to their experience of school-based learning. When talking about learning with school-educated peers at University, Participant W explained:

"what you do kind of at school is only a shadow of real academia…when I talk about academia, it's not the same thing as what goes on in school, as far as I know, and the reason I think it doesn't go on in schools is that it didn't really go on in GCSE, there was quite a lot of learning very broad concepts, not that much critical thinking, quite just learning things by rote, box ticking. There's a lot of multiple choice and learning quite insular nuggets of information".

A key, but by no means the only, factor affecting the academic value of school was the preparation for assessment by exam. Participant Y explained:

"in Biology, I remember the GCSE was very much about memorising data… I got an A star in that subject because I managed to perfect my exam technique for that. I

knew that for each question you needed this component and this component and this component, point and evidence and explanation or whatever that formula is. I forget all the acronyms, now it just comes naturally, but I could tell speaking to science students later on that it was all massively simplified, it was more like learning a leaflet than learning a textbook".

Participant W felt that many learning tasks at school lacked academic value at all:

"so we're really good at processing the reward circuitry for stuff like that, that you start with something, you apply effort and you end up with something better. Whereas with homework, it's, it's like the prisoners in Auschwitz who were made to carry salt to one side of the camp and then back again. Like that's literally considered torture, and yet you effectively do that to pupils, like it's not physical labour but it's the same thing, it's work for the sake of work".

It is important to note that the context of the Home Edder group interview from which these the last three quotes are drawn was primarily concerned with experience of GCSE and A-level school-based learning, but other comments by the participants indicated that they apply to the whole of the school learning experience.

5   Discussion

5.1   Introduction

This study is an investigation of how home-educating parents and home educated young adults perceived their experience of home education, with a focus on social development. A review of the HE literature indicated that concerns over social development in HE are prevalent, but that there is no clear evidence to support these concerns. The current body of research offers little by way of an evidence-base for Educational Psychology practice, so to address this the following research questions were formulated:

- Research Question One - How do Home-Educating parents and Home-Educated young adults understand and engage with the social development of Home- Educated Children?

- Research Question Two - What can Educational Psychologists learn from experiences of home education?

The study used a qualitative methodology involving the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with adults who had been home educated or had home educated their own child or children. Thematic Analysis identified nine themes and 20 sub-themes, ordered into three over-arching themes of Parent Experience, Child Experience and Learning.

These themes and sub-themes are set out in the previous chapter. In this chapter I will address each research question by referencing the relevant themes. Then I will explore some wider reflections arising from the findings. Finally, I will make recommendations for further research and EP practice.

5.2   Research Question 1

How do home-educating parents and home-educated adults understand and engage with the social development of home-educated children?

The current study found several factors and effects related to the social development of HE children and young people. Although social development only manifested as one actual theme (Social Opportunities), it infused several sub-themes in other areas in the over-arching themes of Child's Experience and Parent Experience. To an extent this reflects the holistic nature of home education as experienced by the participants, and whilst it makes analysis more complex and open to interpretation it does provide an authentic voice. To begin with I will share an overview of the response to Research Question One, followed by an exploration of the relevant themes.

5.2.1   Overview

All the participants were thoughtful and reflective about social development and it was clear that it was a topic they were used to being asked about by non-home educators. Individual social networks varied between families, and parents with more than one home-educated child talked about the different needs and preferences of each of their children. For each of the participants, supporting healthy social development meant providing social opportunities that each HE child could choose to engage in. These opportunities involved a mix of pre-established preferences and new experiences, which proved highly adaptable to meet the changing needs of each developing child.

Both the parent participants and home-educated young adults acknowledged that there can be challenges associated with home education social development. However, they felt that the combination of having active control over so many aspects of the child's social world and being embedded in a supportive HE community comprised of a wealth and variety of experience, significantly including experienced parents of older HE children,allowed the family to be far more responsive to the child's needs than if the child had been at school.

Each participant felt that when people outside the HE world voiced concerns about social development in home education, these critics were assuming that school provided a natural or ideal social experience. All participants had significant concerns about aspects of the mainstream school social experience, which they felt were poorly addressed by the critics of home education.

5.2.2   Social Freedom

The theme Social Freedom encapsulates a fundamental aspect of the way each participant understood the social experience of home education, and it is important that this is borne in mind when considering the other themes relevant to this research question. Participants described the freedom to consider activities not available to school children (such as weekly weekday events and groups), the freedom of the child to choose whether they wanted to attend, and the sense of freedom to be themselves once they were there. Most participants attributed this sense of freedom to the child and the community having control through choice, and some made a connection with the initial and fundamental choice to home educate.

The contrast between this freedom and the highly structured social world of school is clear. Participants talked about school in terms of rigidly-defined age and gender groupings during rigidly defined "play" times, often requiring the surrender of personal preference in favour of what the group was doing. The relentless nature of school socialising was also discussed. Participant A talked about his preference for seeing friends individually and how he had to overcome his inherent reluctance for groups when making links with local HE groups for his children. Whilst Participant A made no explicit reference to the social world of school in this context, the ability of a child to manage that preference would be far greater within the social world of home education.

5.2.3   Opportunities for Socialising

The most prominent elements of social opportunities for the participants was how HE social situations allowed children to mix with a range of ages, from very young children to adults, in a relaxed and balanced environment. Some participants described HE groups meetings as a regular part of social contact, with some families attending several groups each week. Other participants described how the groups served as an opportunity for children to make friends, after which group attendance dropped off in favour of play dates with a selected sub-set of the group.

Several participants commented on the variety of groups accessible through Facebook and the internet, meaning that they did not feel trapped into attending a group that they were not comfortable with. Some parent participants talked about the logistical commitment of travelling to groups that may be some distance away, but they felt this was less of an imposition than the logistics of school attendance.

The relationships that HE children and young people get to have with adults are very different to those formed at school. Generally speaking, adults at school need to maintain order and an adherence to an extensive list of behavioural requirements in a situation in which they are vastly outnumbered by children or young people who often have not chosen to be there. Home education affords a broader range of adult interactions, from other parents at HE groups where the numbers of adults and young people are often similar and the behaviour rules are much more simple and acceptable to all, to real-life interactions relating to parental work or personal interests. One outcome of this more equitable experience of adults is that, in the experience of the participants, HE college and university students form much more constructive and collaborative relationships with their teachers and lecturers.

5.2.4   Individuality

The theme of individuality was consistently expressed by the participants as being central to all aspects of the home education experience. Home education was described as a space in which young people learned to find their own social space and explore their interests, and this manifested as their individuality. Stories shared by parent participants of their teenage children's experiences with school-educated friends were not idealised accounts of virtuous teenagers, but instead accounts of young people who tried joining in with rebellious behaviour such as excessive drinking, but decided for themselves that they didn't enjoy the experience enough to keep doing it. This experience was echoed by the Home Edders, along with a shared sense of confusion over why the school-educated peers seemed unable to make rational choices about engaging in drinking behaviour informed by the financial and academic consequences of regular heavy nights out. Their descriptions reminded me of when I undertook my Post-Graduate Initial Teacher training at 31, five to ten years older than other students, and observed many of them make a challenging course so much harder with regular nights out. At the time, I characterised the choice to stay in as a sign that I was old and boring rather than making a mature choice, but that conclusion was partly based on the less-studious choices I regularly made during my undergraduate degree.

5.2.5   Social Pressure

Whilst none of the participants suggested that home education was free from social pressures, most participants drew clear distinctions between the pressures of the HE world and those of school life. Several participants talked about bullying in schools, with different experiences being highly dependent on the response of the school, reducing the ability of the parent and the young person to exert an influence. Bullying was not seen as an issue within HE groups, and participants felt that behaviours and tensions that led to bullying within schools were not applicable in home education for two reasons. First, the inclusive nature and shared

authorship of the group dynamics contributed to an environment where being different was not perceived as a threat to the 'group identity' (an observation that draws interesting parallels with the response of friends and the local community to the home education decision experienced by several parent participants). Second, the children were consistently supported to resolve conflicts and disagreements by each other, their parents and other adults in ways that minimised escalation.

5.2.6   Learning Freedom

Whilst I was expecting participants to talk about freedom in learning approaches, I had not anticipated the subtle and central role that freedom played in the fundamental learning experience. The freedom to explore topics of interest, and, most notably, the freedom to explore learning through free-play was cited as being a fundamental part of the learning process for the participants.

It is important to be clear that whilst none of the themes in this study can claim to be representative of home education as a whole, this theme is most definitely not broadly representative. Autonomous Education is a popular approach to HE, but there are Home Educators who use a full school-style curriculum, and others who use a mix of structure and free-learning. However, the combination of social freedom and learning freedom described by the participants appears to result in the HE child gaining a strong sense of agency in their own life.

5.2.7   Responsibility

The home education experiences shared by participants were filled with opportunities for responsibility for HE young people. From a common HE group culture of older children taking care of younger children to responsibility of household chores such as maintenance and cooking, the nature of home education means that children grow up observing and

participating in responsible roles held by their parents and other key adults. Parent participants seemed to have high expectations of their children from a young age, and both the home educated young adults and the parents of home educated adult children felt that this relationship with responsibility contributed to the individuality already described.

It is important to note that whilst the reported HE experiences actively focus on developing responsibility, it is not possible to conclude that all HE experiences will result in these outcomes. Furthermore, responsibility is often part of the home-life experience of school-educated children too, although the time constraints imposed by the typical school week are likely to impact on the nature and level of those responsibilities.

5.2.8   Concerns over Social Development

The concern over social development within HE is alive and prevalent, and participants found it frustrating for a number of reasons. Several participants felt that the general public assumed that home education social life was like school-educated children's social life but without the school, which seemed to fit into a broader picture of general misunderstanding of home education. For some participants, the relaxed and 'healthy' social environment of HE proved to be a restorative to emotional and mental health consequences of difficult school social experiences. For others, the need to restrict social engagements to create time for individual learning made a mockery of the concerns of isolation that they perceived as dominating the external view of HE. In fact, the home educated young adults felt the word *fears* was more appropriate than concerns to capture the emotive and baseless nature of the concerns they have experienced.

There were some common areas of difficulty with the HE social experience. Parent participants shared about direct and indirect experience of loneliness at transition points (mainly immediately after withdrawing from school, or after key friends have moved

away/returned to school). The general perception was that whilst the difficulties were keenly felt (by the parents as well as the children as HE parents generally spend significantly more time with their children), in most cases they were resolved relatively quickly with support from the HE community. The initial withdrawal from school (or from the social group when the rest of the group began at school) was often the most challenging time as at that stage many families were not connected to a HE group. However, again the influence of the internet proved significant as it enables new HE families to find and connect with local HE groups quickly and discreetly.

5.2.9   Conclusion for Research Question 1

The context of social development in home education is fundamentally different from the context for school education. Participants offered some interesting, and in some cases compelling, hypotheses for the impact of aspects of the home education experience as well as the benefits of bypassing or minimising the detrimental effects of the school experience. However, in the absence of adequate research into the influencing factors, it is important to focus on the actual experiences shared by the participants.

The social world of home education consists of a variety of opportunities, many of which can be identified easily through the internet, and HE children and families can choose to engage in ways that suit them. This social world involves challenges that the family must overcome, and affords access to a broad network of support and experience for parents and children alike.

This world of non-school-based social interaction is hard for people outside of HE to contemplate, and proved a challenge for some of the parent participants at the start of their HE journey. An established part of the HE experience is the inevitable questioning and judgement over social development that Home Edders and their families will be subjected to

– often by close friends and family members. Whilst some participants talked about society becoming more comfortable with the notion of HE, there was frustration at the enduring nature of uninformed objections that often prove resistant to reasoned discussion.

None of the participants claimed that home education is more suitable than school for all children, but all of them had been subject to the inverse view of school superiority numerous times. However, the difference in social skills that the participants observed in home educated adolescents and young adults compared to their school-educated peers, combined with the perspective of school offered by the home educated young adults that had attended school and parent participants that had worked in school, questions the supposed superiority of school-based social experience. The subtle and profound character of HE social worlds (at least the social worlds shared by participants in this study), poses a challenge to critics of home education to explore more carefully both the HE and school-based social experience before passing any judgement.

5.3   Research Question 2

What can Educational Psychologists learn from experiences of home education?

The themes arising from this research offer valuable reflection points on many aspects of education in general. A natural place to begin is with the insights that Educational Psychologists can gain into the experience and context of home education. These insights would support more attuned and effective consultation in situations that involve a HE element, but this contextual awareness is essential for understanding the contribution that HE can make to wider issues of education.

5.3.1   Home Education Context

Home education is a term that covers a wide range of approaches to learning, from a short-term re-creation of the school environment covering a temporary gap in school attendance to

unstructured, autonomous learning that never involves a school. With this in mind, the relevant themes are presented with the intention of helping Educational Psychologists to approach consideration of an HE context with awareness of useful themes to explore – both with the HE situations they may work with and as part of their own reflexive process.

Educational Psychologists often draw on the Eco-Systemic Theory of Bronfenbrenner, which provides a structure for considering the child. This theory places the child at the centre of a complex system of inter-relating forces, as a way of understanding the context of a child (Kelly, 2017). Despite the heterogeneity of home education experience, the themes arising from this study can serve to support an Eco-systemic perspective of a home education family. Even within the small sample of this study, themes held differing levels of relevance to each participant. Therefore, the value of these themes is not direct information about a particular home educating family but instead a context to inform the consultation process that is intrinsic to EP work.

Consideration is given to the Microsystem (the individuals and groups that directly impact the child such as parents and friends), the Mesosystem (relevant interactions within the microsystem),the Exosystem (organisations that indirectly affect the child by affecting the Microsystem), and the Macrosystem (the cultural context).

5.3.1.1   Microsystem

The microsystem is the individuals and groups that directly impact the child, such as parents and friends. Several themes can be associated with the Microsystem, most notably Emotional World, HE Community, Social Opportunities and Freedom.

The Emotional World of home education was described as child-focused and responsive by each participant. Driven by the fundamental value of freedom, the HE child has the opportunity to identify their needs and aspirations and then collaborate with their parents to

achieve them. The flexibility of HE allows for children to approach social, emotional and learning challenges with some control over when and at what rate to tackle them. There was no clear approach to harnessing the possibilities and navigating the challenges offered by this freedom, but several parent participants talked about the invaluable support that they received from the HE community.

The social opportunities related to HE communities are substantially different to the opportunities available in most schools. Of most importance to the participants was the freedom that HE children and young people have. This freedom manifests as having control over when they engage in social activity, the freedom to socialise with a broad range of ages (as opposed to the school environment where it is rare for young people to mix outside of their year group), and the opportunity to engage in a broad mix of social activities. The structure of a HE young person's social life can be very different to a school-educated young person, and as a result often has a different profile of benefits and challenges. HE families often have a relatively high level of control over the range of social opportunities, which allows them to tailor the social world to the needs of the child. There can be circumstances where the degree of control is limited, most notably in the initial stages of embarking on home education when the family often lacks experience, knowledge and the support of a HE group.

Participants' descriptions of the freedoms afforded by the HE social world extended to the way discipline was approached. The common experience was that the peripheral presence of parents at HE groups meant that conflict resolution was both supported and modelled consistently. Whilst many schools have behaviour policies designed to support positive behaviour strategies, participants felt the children responded very positively to the adults in HE groups because the group community was more natural than a school environment, and everyone was more invested in the other members of the group.

5.3.1.2   Mesosystem

The mesosystem comprises of the relevant interactions within the microsystem. Several

participants described how the HE community offers the opportunity for parents to explore

aspects of learning and development within Communities of Practice. In many cases, the

sharing of practitioner experience is enhanced by the perspectives that other parents can offer

on each other's children, depending on the level of participation with meet-up groups. It is

important to recognise the potential of these HE groups as Communities of Practice,

involving parent practitioners who have invested time and effort in the education of their own

children. In normal EP practice, the perspective of other parents (such as the parents of

friends of the child in question) would not be considered. In home education, other parents

become a vital resource of experience and observation. It is misleading to consider this as a

singular community, as several parent participants spoke of membership of several meet-up

groups as well as participating in on-line HE forums. The HE community experience is

difficult to capture because of its dynamic nature and the levels of involvement that it affords.

Safran describes how some home educators engage with their HE group as a "paradigmatic

community of practice", whereas as others will have a "more loose affiliation" (2010, p108).

The home educated young adult participants shared observations on how modelling and

support for parents to develop authoritative parenting styles, and Participant B talked about a

situation with a new family where the culture of parental responsibility needed to be shared

with a new parent member of the group, who initially had assumed that the 'organisers'

would clear up the mess created by their child. In fact, the 'organisers' comprised all the

families involved. This is an example of the voluntary and democratic nature of the groups

described being an unfamiliar experience to most parents, but the participatory nature of the

group leads to learning and acceptance of the group roles. It is important to note that school

communities also can be collaborative, but it is more common for the values to be set by the school with an expectation that they will be adopted by the family.

5.3.1.3   Exosystem

The exosystem is made up of organisations that indirectly affect the child by affecting the Microsystem. The most consistent exosystem experience expressed by the participants was the relationship with their Local Authorities. Although there were individual direct experiences (one positive and one negative), the most common and pervasive experience was concern over the perceived risk that the LA might try to force the family to send their home educated child or children to school against their will. All the participants knew of families who had been pressurised by their LA in this way, and several made some reference to the recommendations of the Badman Report, which sought to establish a rigorous inspection regime. Participants felt an inspection regime would be an invasion of their right to privacy, implied that there was a legitimate concern over the standard of education in HE for which there is no evidence, and would suffer from a fundamental lack of understanding of the nature of home education. For example, several participants talked about the concern they had about being able to demonstrate what learning had taken place. Most of the participants felt that their Local Authority expected that home education would resemble school education in terms of timetabled, subject-based discreet learning sessions that followed a plan and were assessed through tests. Whilst there are home educators who use a school-based approach, there is no evidence that this is more effective than more autonomous approaches. Furthermore, the home educated young adults highlighted how even small amounts of imposed structure can have a significant impact on the sense of freedom and motivation that were central components of the education experience shared by all the participants.

Whilst some more-experienced parent participants reflected that home education was more accepted by society now than when they first embarked on it, there was a common

experience amongst the parent participants of some members of their wider local community taking issue with the decision to home educate their children. The parent participants described these negative reactions as the local community of parents interpreting home education as a judgement of the local school. For some parent participants, this resulted in a change to their social network as they moved from ambivalent or even hostile circles and into more like-minded and accepting HE groups. Although not a point explicitly explored in interviews, some parent participants continued to feel some isolation from the rejection by their local community as the friends formed through HE groups were often less local.

5.3.1.4   Macrosystem

The Macrosystem refers to the cultural context. Several participants referred to the Badman Report, which, despite not being enacted, still lingers in the consciousness of the home education community as an example of the potential for the Government to try and introduce intrusive and extremely problematic inspection regimes. Whilst opposition to the Report was vocal, the participants were aware that the main factor in its downfall was the change of government the following year. With the theme of freedom and choice being so prevalent throughout the HE experience, it is understandable that the potential for the Government to interfere in HE without attempting to listen or understand remains a deep concern.

5.3.2   Reflections on Home Education

In consideration of contributing to Educational Psychologists' understanding of home education, perhaps the most important observation is the all-pervasive importance of freedom that underpins the experience and expression of HE. In home education, membership of social and learning communities is by choice, which has a significant impact on the quality of interactions and relationships that result. Any attempt to impose structure, however well-intentioned, can have subtle but significant unexpected consequences that would be very

difficult for someone outside the HE community to relate to. Participants in this study described experiences of evolving structure within their approach to HE. For some, initial structure provided reassurance of familiar learning activities and a way to understand the learning experience. For others, home education was structure=free from the outset. Some participants described a move to greater structure in preparation for a potential return to school for GCSEs. Participant C felt that, with hindsight, the initial structure came at the expense of much-needed decompression from school and wished that the structure had a the very least been significantly delayed. In a manner of speaking, HE freedom entails the freedom to explore freedom itself. The freedom to decide what structure is appropriate, and the freedom to reflect on and revise structures, are core to the common experience.

When Participant E talked about the importance to her of living in "natural time", I found it hard to understand what she meant. Subsequent to the interview, I listened to a podcast about home education (School Sucks Podcast 2015), where an argument forwarded in favour of HE was that it meant the Government did not dictate when a family has to get up, can go on holiday, or simply spend time together. I reflected that I took for granted the need to spend five days a week at school for 40 weeks a year, and that my family worked around the logistical challenges that school presented as if they were immovable objects. I make no judgement about the advantages of either approach to education, but I realized that I had been unaware of my own relationship with time and ignorant of the extent to which my childhood was structured around an institution that I had never known was optional. It is possible that school-educated adults have already developed a sense of time that assumes great limitations, and these assumptions have affected my ability to appreciate the subtlety of Participant B's relationship with time. This prompted me to consider the possibility of other areas where my unchallenged assumptions would limit my ability to understand the experience of home education.

Even experienced Home-Educators can struggle with deeply-embedded assumptions about learning. For example, Participant G talked about her ongoing struggle with accepting autonomous learning (one of many approaches to HE) as legitimate, despite years of experience seeing how it has engendered creativity, motivation and success in her children. She talked about learning topics not usually found on a school syllabus, such as special effects make-up, and reflected:

"I know she was learning a skill, but I didn't really think of it as education… It's about being able to take it and go "OK, it's all learning.", and stop trying to pigeonhole it into school learning. It's like, who decides what education is anyway? It's such a powerful…, the whole school system and what they value is such a powerful institution, because I went through it myself and it's everywhere, isn't it? It is so hard to let that go, and I still haven't been able to let it go".

Despite having made a conscious choice to embrace an alternative philosophy for learning, and with the benefit of consistent positive feedback from the approach, Participant G still felt unable to let go of the belief that the school curriculum and approach is inherently the most valuable form of learning. If an experienced and dedicated home educator struggles to overcome her assumptions about education, then perhaps a reflexive Educational Psychologist should be prepared to feel uncomfortable with the challenge that HE poses to these assumptions.

The argument about home education affording families the freedom from Government control over when they take their holiday made in the School Sucks Podcast (2015) is particularly topical, as the UK supreme court recently upheld a fine issued to a father who took his daughter out of school for a family holiday by the Isle of Wight Local Authority (Guardian Website 2017). The supreme court ruling represents the most recent development in an ongoing legal proceeding where the father in question, Mr Jon Platt, has disputed the

interpretation of "regular attendance" as stipulated in the 1996 Education Act, arguing that his daughter's attendance still qualified as regular, enabling the family to take a holiday that they could not have afforded during school holidays. Prior to new regulations published in 2013, school headteachers had the ability to grant up to two-weeks holiday during term time on a case-by-case basis.

5.3.3   Reflections on Social Development

When considering the possible basis for concern over the social environment of home education, I tried to identify a developmental framework that would favour the school environment. The closest I could find was Erikson's psychosocial theory of personality development. As commented on in the literature review, Erikson's theory is often characterised as proposing a series of eight age-related stages involving attempts to resolve a particular crisis. The eight stages describe the age and situation in which the individual will face each crisis. For example, the issue of Trust v Mistrust is situated in Infancy, which makes sense from the perspective of Attachment Theory (Bowlby 1973). However, after a longitudinal study examining the development of related traits through adult life, Whitboure *et al* (2009) reframe the theory as "a set of issues that are most likely to be characterised by certain struggles among the biological, psychological, and social forces acting on the individual" (p1329).

Whitboure et al explored Erikson's assertion that each issue can become salient at any point, and that the crisis for each issue (time of greatest salience and opportunity for resolution) can occur outside of the assigned stages and in a different order if the individual is confronted with salient psychosocial forces by analysing data from a longitudinal study (2009). The initial cohort of U.S. college students completed a questionnaire measure of psychosocial development in 1966. The measure was re-applied to the cohort 11 years later, and a new cohort began the process. Both cohorts were re-tested in 1988-89, then in 1999. They found

that trust, autonomy and initiative, considered to be the first three stages of the series and to conclude by school-age, continued to develop through the participants' mid-50s. They concluded that the interpretation of the theory that describes these issues as being resolved within a "ladder" of stages is misleading, and that a "matrix" approach (in which each of the issues arise at multiple ages) is more appropriate (Whitbourne, Sneed & Sayer, 2009).

This proposed matrix structure, as opposed to ladder, could perhaps bring into question the popular view of development. The ladder model offers an 'idealised' developmental pathway that is not representative of reality, and may contribute to an assumption that school is an intrinsic component of healthy psychosocial development. For example, in the progressive stage model of the theory, the conflict of Industry versus Inferiority occurs in the stage "School" between the ages of 6 and 11. Whilst this possesses apparent logic (the school experience between these ages could be viewed as contributing to an individual's definition and experience of success and failure), the research indicated that this conflict is still actively being resolved in the early adult workplace. This finding can be interpreted in one of two ways; either the age limits assigned to the stage are incorrect, or the school experience does not support successful resolution of the crisis. In contrast, the theme of motivation emerging from the current study suggests that the resolution of this crisis can occur differently in home education. Participants interpreted the difference in motivation between HE students and many of their school-educated peers as resulting from the intrinsic motivation that HE supports. It is also possible that the authentic environment of home education allows for a more successful resolution of Industry V Inferiority.

Other themes emerging from this study appear relevant to Erikson's conflict, such as Authenticity (Identity V Role Confusion), and Social Freedom and Choice (Intimacy V Isolation). As these themes represent significant perceived differences in outcomes between school and HE experience, the re-structuring of Erikson's developmental model warrants a

fresh appraisal of the relative merits of the environment of school and of types of home education to the development of personality.

It is important to stress that I am not suggesting that home education is, or even may be, a superior or more desirable approach to supporting successful personality development. Instead, this study highlights how the issue appears more complex than previously thought, and deserves fair evaluation rather than the assumption of suitability of school environment.

5.3.4   Reflections on Pedagogy

When considering the names of the themes, I originally named Approach to HE as Pedagogy of HE. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines pedagogy as "the art, science, or profession of teaching", which is how I have engaged with the word since considering it for my Initial Teacher Training. Whilst this fits with the feel of the theme, I noticed that the etymology of pedagogy derived from a combination of Greek words that together mean "to lead a child". The notion of 'leading' a child felt directly at odds with the principle of freedom and choice that was central to every participant's encapsulation of home education, and so I chose alternatives to pedagogy for theme and sub-theme names.

The etymology of pedagogy has a connection to the observations of Meighan that a significant contributing factor to the prevalence of bullying in schools is the inherently authoritarian and bullying power relationships at every level of the state education system (Meighan 1995). The relationship of power abuse and teaching is explored in the seminal text Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Friere 1993). Initially conceived as a critique of the use of education to maintain injustice in Brazil, Friere's work explores the inherent, and sometimes unconscious, use of education as a tool of domination. Friere describes a "banking" conception of state education, in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p53). It is

important to note that in the state system, the 'bestower' is not just the teacher who delivers the lesson, but also the controllers of the curriculum and educational policy. Friere expands on this analogy to illustrate a relationship where students are considered as receptacles whose purpose is to be filled with the knowledge from the teacher. According to Friere, the more passive the receptacle, the more successful the student.

Friere was commenting on the intentionally oppressive education system in Brazil, and implying equivalence with the UK system is both inappropriate and unhelpful. However, parallels can be drawn between the banking analogy and the experience of GCSE and A-level state education shared by the home educated young adults and some of the parent participants. All the home educated young adults talked of school classes geared to exam technique and formulaic presentation of knowledge rather than creativity or critical thinking, and Participant Y referred to the GCSE science as "learning a leaflet".

The home educated young adults talked about the impact that this approach to learning had on their motivation, but it is likely that they were much more aware of these factors than their school-educated peers as they had extensive experience of alternative methods of learning. Consequences of the banking model of education extend beyond the school classroom. In Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (Pirsig, 1999), the author recounts his tortuous experience of teaching rhetoric in a U.S. college. Through a process of setting novel and innovative writing tasks he was able to extract genuinely original writing from his students rather than the mimicry of existing ideas he had grown used to receiving. Pirsig writes "…imitation was a real evil that had to be broken before real rhetoric teaching could begin. This imitation seemed to be an external compulsion. Little children didn't have it. It seemed to come later on, possibly as a result of school itself… Schools teach you to imitate. If you don't imitate what the teacher wants you get a bad grade." (p192).

Pirsig was referring to experiences in the 1970s, but his concerns are echoed by Schmidt (2000). In Disciplined Minds, a critical appraisal of the negative impact of professional training, Schmidt describes a culture of 'playpen' thinking and creativity, where purportedly independent-thinking individuals make decisions solely based on externally-derived criteria. Schmidt describes the phenomena of 'playpen critical thinking', which he describes as "judging whether or not the ideas of others are in line with the favoured outlook, but does not involve developing (an) independent point of view" (p41). Whilst Schmidt explores how this process is exacerbated by corporate interests and conditioned self-subordinating behaviour, he believes it is made possible by "at least 16 years of preparatory socialization (sic) in the schools" (p250). In this case, socialisation is used to denote the process by which an individual learns how to behave in a way that is socially acceptable to society, rather than as a reference to social development.

So, what solutions or alternatives do these writers offer? Friere feels that education should consist of "acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (p60). To this end he offers a model of education based on problem-posing, in which the roles of teacher and student become entwined so that sometimes the student teaches and the teacher is taught through an ongoing dialogue. Pirsig experimented with withholding grades within his rhetoric classes as a way of reducing the extrinsic motivation of passing or achieving an A-grade in favour of developing intrinsic, authentic success criteria. And Schmidt calls for professionals to embrace being radical in their politics and critical thinking as a way of reclaiming authenticity.

It must be acknowledged there are schools that are addressing some of these concerns through problem-based learning approaches, adopting the principles of the teacher as co-learner, the authentic development of individual character, and broader forms of learning

assessment than grades. However, HE, as experienced by the participants, addresses each of the concerns directly.

As discussed earlier, authenticity in personal expression as well as in learning activity and opportunity for responsibility was considered a defining component of the participants' HE experiences, and it can be argued that, in many cases, the decision to home educate is one of radical authenticity to a system of developmental values, whether religious, political or philosophical.

The absence of grades, or summative assessment (assessment *of* learning that occurs at the end of a learning experience to demonstrate what has been learned, as opposed to the assessment *for* learning that occurs before and during a learning experience to guide the learner and the teacher/facilitator co-ordinate activities, resources, support and effort effectively) often formed part of the parent participant's concerns over LA inspection. Not only did the participants have little to show by way of formal assessment, they also recognised that an assessment regime would have a detrimental effect on the experience, motivation and effectiveness of the HE learning experience – explicitly in contradiction to the core concept of freedom that seemed to sit at the heart of each participants' experience. The difference between the HE and school attitudes to assessment was illustrated by the home educated young adults and their qualification paths to attending Undergraduate Degree courses at University. One Home Edder took more A-levels than GCSEs, as the GCSEs were viewed simply as a vehicle for gaining access to A-levels of interest. Another Home Edder attended University despite never taking GCSE English (due to philosophical objections epitomised by the decision by the examining board to edit the final lines from a poem on the list of set texts). These experiences highlight not only the faculty of Home Edders to identify and pursue alternative paths to achieve their goals, but the type of motivations that their decision-making process is able to accommodate.

The conclusion is not that school does not support these goals, or that home education always does support them. The conclusion is that home education offers insights into effective approaches to enduring educational issues of great concern, and treating these insights as legitimate and worthy of exploration may provide new and fruitful approaches that can be incorporated into school approaches.

5.3.5   Reflections on Authenticity

Whilst authenticity was a key theme that influenced many aspects of participants' experience of home education, there was little by way of a common approach to addressing it. However, Participant G made several references to Nonviolent Communication as a core concept in her family's approach to home education.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is based on the premise that emotions arise as a result of the individual's experience of universal needs either being met or not met (Rosenberg 2003). Rosenberg offers a four-stage process based on the four components of NVC: judgement-free observation of a situation; noticing the relevant feelings and emotions; an investigation of needs met and unmet; and, finally, the making of a non-demanding request that may meet or validate unmet needs (Nosek 2012). Nosek explored the use of NVC by nursing students, and concludes that the approach enhanced empathetic and authentic communication.

Participant G reflected on the difficulties encountered in integrating NVC into home education:

"our initial attempts had been pretty grim, but we got better as the years went on, and the kids have now got that language which, that's, I think that really really helps them in lots and lots of different ways, just that understanding, a little deeper understanding of when you're dealing with somebody there is a need driving it".

Participant G also shared the experience of her son, who, after many years of being immersed in NVC-driven home education and the language of meeting needs, realised that a year in sixth-form college studying for A-levels had replaced his awareness of needs with the focus of achieving grades.

Whilst NVC is not the only approach to authentic communication, it does offer a coherent structure that has proven to be beneficial in a professional context as well as in home education. Participant G's experience can be regarded as practice-based evidence, and could be used to inform the adoption of NVC as a tool of authentic communication in a school setting.

5.3.6   Conclusions for Research Question 2 - "What are you afraid of?"

When asked how she would respond to the concerns many non-HE people have about social development, Participant E reflected on the discomfort that she felt at the question and turned it around: *"I want to ask them, "what are you afraid of?".* I believe that this question is important for two reasons:

The first reason is that, given that despite numerous studies there remains a lack of evidence indicating that home education can result in social isolation or poor development of social skills, it would seem reasonable that anybody wishing to question the decision to home educate should be clear about what their concerns are based on. The general, non-specific concern experienced by participants may be based on legitimate grounds, but equally they may arise from inaccurate assumptions of home-educating families "at desks or the kitchen table, for the equivalent of the school day" (Thomas 1998, p127). The more experienced parent participants commented on the many ways that the internet has facilitated the HE social experience, from linking groups to finding activities to allowing social contact at a distance. It is possible that current concerns predate the internet, and have not been re-

examined in the light of new technology. Whilst it could be considered simple courtesy to ensure that unsolicited criticism of a person's choices is fair, balanced and based on evidence, the responsibility is far greater when the criticism is made by professionals empowered by the state who have a moral duty to ensure their influence is exerted ethically.

The second reason to consider the question is that identifying and understanding the fears held about home education offers the potential for useful insight into assumptions about learning and development that restrict our ability to understand these processes, and so limits our ability to improve education and wellbeing services for children and young people no matter the setting. For example, if professionals in education are prone to the "playpen critical thinking" identified by Schmidt, then perhaps it is inevitable that this would lead to issues with an education system that follows a fundamentally different ideology.

For these reasons, the question of what non-Home Educators are afraid of when we think about home education is worth exploring through further research. Such a project could involve eliciting the views and opinions of participants with different levels of experience of mainstream education (parents of primary- and secondary-school children, school staff, Local Authority staff involved in education and welfare, as well as adults with little or no connection to schools). Looking for common themes between the concerns of individuals will help enable more meaningful and focused research and reflection, helping reduce the barriers to collaboration over HE as well as allowing research to focus on areas of more legitimate concern in both Home and School Education.

Perhaps the most important lesson that Educational Psychologists can learn from home education is that, despite a lack of evidence demonstrating the wider applicability of approaches used, there is a growing body of literature documenting home education experiences that challenge core assumptions held school education. Instead of viewing home

education as a rival educational approach, EPs may find great benefit in regarding home education as a legitimate option and a source for reflection.

5.4   Reflections on Initial Assumptions

In the methodology, I set down a set of assumptions that I identified prior to conducting the interviews with participants. In the following section I will reflect on these assumptions, both in terms of the impact that the findings had on them and how they may have influenced the research itself.

- I want to raise the profile of home education as a valid alternative approach to education. I believe that the common position of assuming the normalcy of mainstream education and marginalising home education hinders a healthy inspiration for reflection of educational practice.

My desire to raise the profile of home education originated in the attitudes to home education I encountered when working as a Teaching Assistant with an HE boy who had just joined school in Year 6 (age 10). I was struck by both his positive attitude to learning, and by the staff focus on his deficits in attainment. Even without judging one system against the other, it was clear that many of the strengths of his home education experience did not contribute to school success, and that school would not support him in building on those strengths. In fact, neither HE nor the school seemed to recognise several of these strengths.

My perspective has evolved through the early stages of this research project, where I became immersed in home education research as well as had the opportunity to talk with home educators, but it has remained a driving inspiration for me to conduct the research. I accept that, despite my efforts to remain neutral and transparent during the interviews and analysis, it can be argued that my stated desire represents a degree of bias. To counter that claim I would argue that my role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist working in state-maintained

schools could be interpreted as a pro-school bias. Rather than arguing in favour of home education for all, I have sought to explore the value of home education, both to the families involved and, through consideration of the perspectives and approaches used, to the education community as a whole.

The findings of this research have given me a broader and deeper sense of how home education can work, and how that perspective can provide useful insights to HE and school communities. The subtle connections between personal, social, and educational development proved both challenging to identify and elusive to name, but they may be as relevant to school as they are to home education. I am still concerned that valuable insights may be overlooked by professionals who dismiss the validity of HE experiences without due consideration.

- Are trained educators and a common curriculum made necessary by methods of mass quantitative assessment that are valued over any qualitative assessment of learning? Has mainstream education become over-focused on outcomes instead of process, perhaps making home education one of the few options for a process-driven education?

These reflections did not arise from consideration of home education, but instead originated in the frustrations I felt as a classroom teacher. The balance between learning and summative assessment (assessment of learning, as opposed to formative assessment which informs the leaning process) is difficult to maintain, and there is no single approach used by schools. The first question appears provocative on reflection, but given that successful and effective home education can occur without input from formally trained educators or from an organised curriculum it feels appropriate to question the assumption that they are integral to learning. Similarly, the culture of league tables and Ofsted reports, highly familiar to many parents of school children who are on what Participant A described as the "treadmill" of the school

application process, does not seem to address the aspects of personal, social and learning development identified in the themes of this research.

I do not feel that these questions influenced the interviews, as I asked no direct questions about school learning or process versus outcome, and the participants who shared views on these subjects did so freely and unprompted. However, I feel it is reasonable to question whether I would have made the connection between authenticity and learning tasks had I not already been questioning the motivation behind mainstream school learning tasks, which leaves this connection open to the criticism of bias. I would argue that the prevailing culture, in which parents and children are often expected to accept the rules and practice of schools without question, is equally biased. This pro-school bias is often unacknowledged, making rational evaluation of approaches less effective, and the findings of this report retain legitimacy as a reasonable and constructive counter-point to this prevailing culture rather than as a definitive verdict on the culture of school learning.

- I am concerned that there is an inherent risk in professionals such as EPs, unaware of their mainstream paradigm, imposing inappropriate frameworks on the delicate ecosystem created by home educators who have worked hard to provide their children with an education fundamentally different to what those professionals themselves grew up in and then trained in. Is it possible to conceive of ways for engaging with home education that support the process rather than attempt to assimilate the process into a mainstream conceptualisation of education?

This reflection represented a significant change in my assumptions about the Educational Psychologist role in home education. My initial research was conducted with home educating parents known to the Local Authority EPs where I was training at the time. Whilst I acknowledged the inherent bias in the population in favour of EP effectiveness, the theme identifying EPs as the most HE-friendly professionals in the participants' experience of the

LA seemed highly reasonable given the EP focus on the wellbeing and voice of the child, as well as the wishes of the parents. However, through conversations with the HE group gatekeepers, I became more open to the idea that I carried unchallenged assumptions about the nature of education from my childhood and professional experience of school, and that these assumptions could lead me to counter-productive approaches to working with home educators. I feel that this sceptical stance enhanced my ability to maintain a more objective stance during the interviews, as well as moderating my personal interpretation when identifying themes.

I feel that the findings support the stated concern. In particular, I think that the subtle nature of several key aspects of home education, such as the expression of freedom and the pervasive quality of authenticity in both learning and personal development, represent a significant challenge to professionals accustomed to working in schools. Parent participants described how difficult they found it to observe or describe much of the learning that takes place within their home education environment, so how much more challenging would this be for a visiting professional? My own professional experience of home education involved an assessment of a home educated child for an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), completed towards the end of this research project. The child had significant learning needs arising from a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and the child's parents had already arranged support from a private Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) service (ABA is a recognised intervention for ASD), a private Speech and Language Therapist and other private qualified specialists. I reflected that the structures that the family had chosen to put in place greatly facilitated my role in providing psychological advice for the EHCP panel to consider. Had the family chosen a less-formal (but potentially equally-appropriate) approach I would have had little opportunity to properly understand the learning environment they had created, and the format of the report submitted to the panel may have presented significant

barriers to communicating whatever I did understand. I make no suggestions for solutions to these issues, other than that the first step is raising the awareness of these issues amongst professionals and the wider community.

- Since starting out on this research, I have been influenced by Meighan's exploration of the authoritarian learning system that operates in the UK, and the pedagogy of power through bullying that infuses each level of the school system and its regulation (Meighan 2005).

Revisiting this perspective in the light of the findings, I feel that the identified themes provide strong support for Meighan's perspective. Within the experiences of school shared by the participants were several accounts where the power held by school staff was exercised in an emotionally cold and un-nurturing way, or the voice of the child and family were completely overlooked. One participant talked about how the discipline system was manipulated by perceptive peers, allowing injustice to remain unaddressed. In contrast, the accounts of home education groups describe experiences of inclusion, mutual respect, collaboration, and acceptance. Even with the vital caveat that the experiences shared cannot be regarded as representative of either the HE or school experience, this research presents a more nuanced account of the way values and structures can influence personal, social and learning development.

HE can be regarded as an expression of personal values, both by the parents and the child/ young person who is home educated. This research has suggested pathways through which these values can make a positive contribution to the life and learning of HE young people, both during the home education and into adult life. The impact of values on the development of children and young people at school is likely to be more complicated to consider, as the values of the family and the young person will interact with the values of school. Home-educating families may similarly be influenced by the values of HE groups that they participate in, but as participation in groups is optional (and far-less frequent than school-

attendance), it seems less likely that HE families would be confronted with conflicting values from HE groups that they belonged to than school-educating families might from their school.

It is important to acknowledge again that there are likely to be schools that both respect and engage constructively with the issues of power dynamics and authoritarian cultures, just as there are likely to be HE families that do not engage constructively with them. The research highlights both the importance of considering this aspect of education and the potential for home education to offer effective approaches.

5.5   Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to EP understanding of home education through identifying themes in the experiences of home-educating parents and home educated young adults. The subtle yet powerful impact of freedom and authenticity was not immediately apparent, but I found it to be an essential element when considering the context and the strengths of the home education experiences that were shared. Appreciation of both the context and the strengths of HE is essential before EPs can be in a position to support home education or to benefit from the wider insights that it can offer.

Following the principle of Evidence-Based Practice, it is important for EPs to examine whether their assumptions about home education are supported by evidence, and to be active in maintaining an open and curious mind when engaging with the HE community. The legislative framework for Educational Psychologists to follow when addressing children and young people with special educational needs (the Children and Families Act 2014 (CFA 2014) and the associated SEND Code of Practice 2014 (SEND CoP 2014)) highlight the need to

place the voice of the child and the family at the centre of all considerations. It would be in keeping with the spirit of this legislation for professionals engaging with home-educating families to actively consider how their assumptions may constitute a barrier to the voice of the child and the family being understood.

In some ways, the Educational Psychologist position on home education versus school education could be considered as similar to the discussion of mainstream school versus special school in an EHCP recommendation. Instead of expressing a preference for a particular type of setting, EPs instead focus on establishing the needs of the child and consider how these needs can be met using the full range of available resources, in compliance with the wishes of the young person involved and their parent(s)/guardian(s). The notion that either school or home education could be considered a superior approach seems both unconstructive and inappropriate in the light of the subtle and powerful nature of many differences between them (as well as the broad range of approaches evident in both HE and school education). Therefore, the conclusion drawn from this reflection is that home education comprises a range of approaches that, when treated as legitimate educational experiences, offer unique and constructive insights into alternative approaches to effective learning and development environments and opportunities.

6   Research Critique

The sample population for this study represented a limited group of approaches to learning,

so that conclusions relating to the participants cannot be regarded as representative of all

Home Educators. Also, the nature of interviews is that it provides a snapshot of the views of

the participant without any context for that snapshot. It must always be remembered that

the same questions asked on a different day, or by a different researcher, could elicit

significantly different responses. Whilst each participant was given the opportunity to

review the transcript of the interview, this study would have benefitted from a process of

'checking-in" with the participants once themes had been identified, to help support the

claim that the themes are an authentic representation of the views of the participants.

6   Research Critique

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Appendix A: Ethics Approval

Ethics Application Form: Student Research

Section 1 Project details

a.	Project title		Learning from the experience of home educating parents: an inquiry into how Educational Psychologists can provide support to those families considering or engaging in home education
b.	Student name		Pete Bowers
c.	Supervisor/Personal Tutor		Dr Alan Thomas Dr Orla Dunne
d.	Department		Psychology and Human Development

e.	Course category (Tick one)	PhD/MPhil ☐		EdD ☐	
		MRes ☐		DEdPsy X	
		MTeach ☐		MA/MSc ☐	
		ITE ☐			
		Diploma (state which) ☐			
		Other (state which) ☐			

f.	Course/module title	Thesis Research Project
g.	**If applicable,** state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.	
h.	Intended research start date	February 2016
i.	Intended research end date	March 2017
j.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in *If research to be conducted abroad please check www.fco.gov.uk and submit a completed travel insurance form to Serena Ezra (s.ezra@ucl.ac.uk) in UCL Finance (see guidelines). This form can be found here (you will need your UCL login details available): https://www.ucl.ac.uk/finance/secure/fin_acc/insurance.htm*	UK

k. Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

   Yes ☐   External Committee Name:

	No X ⬜*go to Section 2*	Date of Approval:

If yes:
- − Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- − Proceed to Section 10 Attachments**.**

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

Section 2 Project summary

Research methods (tick all that apply)

Please attach questionnaires, visual methods and schedules for interviews (even in draft form).

X   Interviews
X   Focus groups
X   Questionnaires
⬜   Action research
⬜   Observation
X   Literature review

⬜ Controlled trial/other intervention study
⬜ Use of personal records
⬜ Systematic review ⬜*if only method used go to Section 5.*
⬜ Secondary data analysis ⬜*if secondary analysis used go to Section 6.*
⬜ Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups
⬜ Other, give details:

Please provide an overview of your research. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, your method of data collection (e.g., observations, interviews, questionnaires, etc.) and kind of questions that will be asked, reporting and dissemination (typically 300-500 words).

Purpose:
This research project seeks to build upon the findings of my Year 1 Dissertation to achieve a greater understanding of the experience and situation of parents who choose to educate their children at home.

Aim:
The aim of this research is to identify key elements in the experience of home-educating families that will inform the practice of professionals supporting such families, in particular Educational Psychologists. The research will aim to identify relevant background factors that should be considered by Educational Psychologists when working with home educated children and young people, in terms of specific influences, pressures and risk and resilience factors that impact on the family experience and the learning and development of the child/ young person and optimal times for engaging in these cases.

Main Research Questions:

RQ1:   Are there common experiences associated with home education that could benefit from professional support?

RQ2:   What role can Educational Psychologists play in supporting home education?

These research questions are still being considered, and will be reviewed as part of the initial stage of work once ethical approval has been gained.

Research Design and Methodology:
This is a qualitative methods study that follows a social constructionist perspective. The main body of research will most likely be thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with parents who are currently, or who have had experience of, educating at least one child at home. Draft schedules for the interviews are attached to this application, but the questions and the choice of vocabulary will be explored with home educating parents to reduce ambiguity and miscommunication.

As part of the social constructivist stance it is necessary to question whether the construct of a home-educating parent is homogenous enough to support broad conclusions being drawn. In the circumstance that the answer to that question is no, the methodology may alter to focus more on a small number of detailed case studies, in which case other individuals relevant to individual cases may be interviewed (such as the child/young person, relevant Local Authority figures, relevant school, etc).

Participants:
Initial participants will be organisers of Home Education groups and networks, who will help frame the question and whose approval will significantly increase access to home educating parents.

The main group of participants are expected to be parents who are, or have been, educating at home. If necessary, the group of participants may be broadened to include education and Local Authority professionals relevant to specific cases, as well as the children/young people involved.

Reporting:
The reporting will take the form of anonymised collating of data to identify, interpret and analyse themes relating to the research questions. The analysis will include consideration of ways in which Educational Psychologist practice could be applied, or adjusted, to support home educators.

Dissemination:
Main conclusions will be communicated to all participants and interested home education groups, as well as Local Authorities and Educational Psychology Services.

Section 3 Participants

Please answer the following questions giving full details where necessary. Text boxes will expand for your responses.

a. Will your research involve human participants?   Yes X   No ☐ ⇨ *go to Section 4*

b. Who are the participants (i.e. what sorts of people will be involved)? Tick all that apply.

☐   Early years/pre-school

X   Ages 5-11

X   Ages 12-16

X   Young people aged 17-18

☐   Unknown – specify below

X   Adults *please specify below*

☐   Other – specify below

NB: Ensure that you check the **guidelines** (Section 1) carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES).

c. If participants are under the responsibility of others (such as parents, teachers or medical staff) how do you intend to obtain permission to approach the participants to take part in the study?

(Please attach approach letters or details of permission procedures – see Section 9 Attachments.)

In the event that I would want to interview a child/ young person (CYP), it would be as a result of having already interviewed that CYP's parent or parents. I would first seek the permission of the parents, and then seek the permission of the CYP.

d. How will participants be recruited (identified and approached)?

Participants will be recruited through home education networks and groups. My intention is to contact local and national group organisers and key community gatekeepers, and then address groups to explain the research and ask for volunteers.

Should a broader group of participants be sought, this will be discussed with the original participant. In particular, permission for the relevant CYP will be sought. Ideally interviews will take place with professionals familiar with the specific case, but this will dependent on the original participant's permission, and equivalent professionals may be consulted about an anonymised version of the case.

e. Describe the process you will use to inform participants about what you are doing.

The initial talk I intend to give at home education groups will begin with a brief explanation of my interest in the subject, background and the key findings from my dissertation (also about home education). I will explain the purpose of this research and a brief outline of the process (stressing the anonymity), as well as the opportunity to ask questions at any stage.

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f.	How will you obtain the consent of participants? Will this be written? How will it be made clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any time? *See the guidelines for information on opt-in and opt-out procedures. Please note that the method of consent should be appropriate to the research and fully explained.* *Written permission will be sought from each participant. The form will explain that the participant can withdraw at any time.*
g.	**Studies involving questionnaires:** Will participants be given the option of omitting questions they do not wish to answer? Yes X No ☐
	If **NO** please explain why below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.
h.	**Studies involving observation:** Confirm whether participants will be asked for their informed consent to be observed. Yes ☐ No ☐
	If **NO** read the guidelines (Ethical Issues section) and explain why below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.
i.	Might participants experience anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment as a result of your study? Yes X No ☐
	If **yes** what steps will you take to explain and minimise this? *It is possible that during the course of the interview that the participant may be reminded of a distressing event or time. In the event that the participant experiences anxiety, discomfort or embarrassment I will suggest that we take a break. The participant will have the options of omitting that question or section of the interview (including me deleting the recording of the uncomfortable section), withdrawing from the research or continuing at another time if they would prefer.* If **not**, explain how you can be sure that no discomfort or embarrassment will arise?
j.	Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants (deception) in any way? Yes ☐ No X
	If **YES** please provide further details below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.
k.	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)?

Yes X No ☐

If **NO** please explain why below and ensure that you cover any ethical issues arising from this in section 8.

l.   Will participants be given information about the findings of your study? (This could be a brief summary of your findings in general; it is not the same as an individual debriefing.)

Yes X No ☐

If **no**, why not?

Section 7 Data Storage and Security
Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.

a.   Confirm that all personal data will be stored and processed in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA 1998). *(See the Guidelines and the Institute's Data Protection & Records Management Policy for more detail.)*   Yes X

b.   Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area?   Yes ☐ *   No X

* If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with the DPA 1998 and state what these arrangements are below.

c.   Who will have access to the data and personal information, including advisory/consultation groups and during transcription?

During the research

d.   Where will the data be stored?

Data will be stored on an encrypted portable hard drive, and backed up on an encrypted home external hard drive.

Will mobile devices such as USB storage and laptops be used?   Yes X * No ☐

* If yes, state what mobile devices: *Initially interview recordings will be recorded on an unencrypted digital recorder, but the recordings will be transferred to the encrypted portable hard drive the same day.*

e.

* If yes, will they be encrypted?: *The digital recorder is not encoded, but the transfer will take place as soon after the interview as possible.*

After the research

f.   Where will the data be stored?

| g. | How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format? |
| h. | Will data be archived for use by other researchers? Yes ☐ * No ☐

 * If yes, please provide details. |

Section 8 Ethical issues

Are there particular features of the proposed work which may raise ethical concerns or add to the complexity of ethical decision making? If so, please outline how you will deal with these.

It is important that you demonstrate your awareness of potential risks or harm that may arise as a result of your research. You should then demonstrate that you have considered ways to minimise the likelihood and impact of each potential harm that you have identified. Please be as specific as possible in describing the ethical issues you will have to address. Please consider / address ALL issues that may apply.
Ethical concerns may include, but not be limited to, the following areas:

- Methods
- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics

- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/Anonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

The ethical considerations for this research fall into three categories: considerate interviewing, data protection and child protection.

Considerate Interviewing

The semi-structured interviews will be framed in a way that allow the participants to talk broadly about their experience of home education, but then allow for more targeted questions to elicit greater detail of topics relating to the research question or of particular interest. In general, interviews with Local Authority officials should not address any particularly emotional issues. However there is a distinct possibility that some of the home-educating parents interviewed may have had challenging or upsetting experiences in the course of their journey of home education (this could be related to the circumstances leading up to the decision to home educate, or consequences arising from that decision). Therefore it is important that this possibility is addressed in the preparation of the interview schedule, with sensitively worded questions and prompts. Also, the introduction to the interview needs to state explicitly that the participant does not need to answer every question, and can take a break or end the interview at any stage if they would like.

After the interview the participant (or parent in the case of CYP) will be offered the option of having the anonymised transcript sent to them for inspection, with a reasonable deadline set for revisions.

Data Protection

The interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder. The recording will be transferred to a password-protected external hard drive and backed-up on a password-protected home PC. Transcribing will take place on the home PC, and will be anonymised as soon as each transcription is complete. Only anonymised transcripts will be used with any data analysis software.

If the case study pathway is chosen, the questions and prompts for any follow-up interviews will be checked to ensure that there are no details that may give a clue to the identity of the specific family under consideration and approved by the research supervisory panel.

Safeguarding

The participants of the initial interviews will all be parents or carers delivering home education. However, in the event that the case study approach is followed it is very possible that follow-up interviews may take place with children or young people who are or have been home educated. In such cases the interviews will be arranged to take place in a suitable setting, with the parent or guardian in the room.

In the unlikely event that a safeguarding concern is raised during any interview, I will inform my supervisory panel and follow the appropriate procedure for the relevant Local Authority.

Section 11 Declaration

	Yes	No
I have read, understood and will abide by the following set of guidelines.	☐	X

BPS X	BERA ☐	BSA ☐	Other (please state) ☐

	Yes	No
I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.	☐	X
I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.	☐	X

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name	
Date	

Appendix B: Interview Schedules

<u>**SSI Parent Schedule**</u>

□   **Please tell me about the circumstances that led you to choose to home educate.**

Has your child/children attended school at any time?

What was your intention at the time? (short-term / permanent)

□   **What has home education been like for you?**

What was your experience of taking your child off roll?

What does a typical week look like?

What do you feel has been particularly successful?

Has your approach to HE changed since you started? How and why?

Have you had any contact with the Local Authority at any point regarding the home education?

Do you have any concerns about your child's education? (Access to exams, Uni admission, etc)

What are your intentions for your child's future education?

Have you experienced any particular challenges? How have you overcome them?

□   **What has home education been like for your child/children?**

What do they enjoy about it?

What have been the benefits to them of home education?

When do they spend time with other young people?

- What groups do they belong to?

- How often and for how long do they spend time with groups / friends?

- What activities do they engage in with their friends?

Are you happy with the opportunities they have to socialize?

□   **Reflection**

Has your experience of HE been what you expected?

With the experience and knowledge you have now, is there anything you might have done differently?

Do you think there is any support you would have found useful at any stage in your home education experience?

Do you think there is any difference between your HE child and children who attend mainstream school

How do you respond to the usual criticism that your child/children might be isolated or lack opportunities for mixing with same-aged children or the social interaction from shared learning at school?

SSI YP Schedule

- **What is home education like for you?**

What is a typical day like?
What do you learn about? How do you learn it?
What kind of activities do you do?
Do you spend time with other young people? What do you do? How often?
- **Mainstream School**

Did you ever attend a mainstream school? Would you tell me about your experience there?
Do you have friends who go to school? What do you think of their experience of school?
Would you like to go to/back to school in the future? Is there anything about school that you wish you could have as part of your HE experience?
- **Reflection**

What is the best thing about being home educated?
How has being home educated helped your learning?
Is there anything you wish could be different about HE?