

Home Education Research

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Q1. How many children in the UK are home educated?

Put simply, we do not know. Latest substantiated figures tell us that there are at least 10,862 (Fortune Wood 2005)¹. This figure represents the number of home educators known to the 109 Local Authorities (LAs) responding to Fortune Wood's Freedom of Information Request. By extrapolating through a population based model, Fortune-Wood suggests the figure of known home educated children may be about 18,100. Further extrapolation leads him to conclude that there are about 45,250 children \pm 10,000 being home educated in the UK.

Q2. Why is the figure not known for sure?

'Registering' with a local authority as a home educator is voluntary unless a child has been withdrawn from school, or unless the LA comes to know about a home educated child and decides to make enquiries. LAs often cite numbers of home educated children that they are know about in their areas, so creating the impression that they are

aware of all home educators. However, because families are under no obligation to reveal themselves, these figures may give little indication of actual home education activity in the area. A straw poll of approximately 400 home educators attending a 1998 London conference on home education indicated that about 80% of attendee home educators were not known to their LAs. Rothermel (2002)² suggested that up to 66% of her sample might not have been known to their LAs.

Whilst the DfES to date, have not made registration compulsory, it seems likely that they will look to collating figures for home educated children in the not too distant future. A feasibility study in 1999, commissioned by the DfES³ indicated that, at that time, a survey into the prevalence of home education was not possible.

Q3. Why do people home educate?

The largest independent and systematic study into home education in the UK is that of academic, educational psychologist and expert witness, Dr Paula Rothermel⁴. Her study involved close analysis of 419 home educating families' questionnaire returns (taken from a total of over 1000). She asked parents why they home educated, allowing respondents to give as many answers as they wanted. She found that the most common reason was "disappointment with education (school)" (31%). "Bullying" was cited by 25%, "child sickness, stress, exhaustion, depression" by 24% and "lack of suitable schools, bad teaching and behaviour in schools" were cited by 16.4% of the sample. These figures show that as many as one third of families had been motivated to home educate due to actual or fear of school bullying and/or school related illness such as sickness, stress and depression in their children.

Despite clear disappointment with schools, perhaps the most interesting finding was that a third of respondents (29%) were home educating because of what they described as, "ideology - always intended to home educate". Parents also felt they had a desire to guide, or a responsibility to be involved in, their children's education (20%).

Rothermel also asked what home education meant to families and again, whilst parents could provide as many meanings as they wanted, the research revealed that 36% of parents reported that it meant the freedom and flexibility to "do what we want, when we want". Subsequent categories were, "child can learn in his or her own style and can develop naturally" (29.74%) and "close relationship/time together" (25.13%).

Other reasons given in the Rothermel study for home educating included mismanagement of special education needs in school, an inability to make suitable provision for gifted children, parental standards and faith, separation issues, child shyness, wanting learning to be fun, distrust of school-taught values, parents' own bad school experiences, peer group pressure, wanting the best for their children, religious bias in education, inappropriateness of school in relation to family life, and wanting to be with their children.

Rothermel concludes that despite coming to home education from diverse starting points, parents who persist often come to see home education as a positive step. Recent research from around the world increasingly describes home education a lifestyle decision⁵.

In 2003⁶ Education Otherwise undertook a questionnaire survey of its 2500 members, receiving 507 responses. Asked why they home educated the results showed that from 3184 answers (respondents could give more than one answer), the strongest influences on the decision to home educate are reasons relating to family lifestyle (33%), followed closely by views about childhood and learning (28%), views and feelings about school (26%). Special needs accounted for 13% of reasons.

With regard specifically to children who had earlier attended school, the most usual reason for withdrawal was found to be bullying either by children or staff (22% of 1186 reasons given), followed by unhappiness with school (or "school phobia") (17%). Other interesting reasons were "child chose not to go" (12%), "child was unable to cope with the routine of school" (11%) and "child could not learn the way teachers taught". These responses in particular seem to signify a movement by parents towards listening and taking seriously what their children are saying about their school experience.

Q4. Is HE restricted to the UK?

No. Home education exists in other countries but in Europe at least, the UK is the leader. Most European countries make home education possible although in Germany it remains illegal. For a thorough understanding of the German stance see the work of Daniel Monk (2005)⁷ and for a brief breakdown of the position in Europe, Dr Glenn (2005)⁸. In Australia Roger Hunter⁹ has outlined the resurgence of home education as an educational alternative and its rapid growth in Australia over the preceding decade. Drawing on information from home education leaders, publications and government reports, he estimated that 10,000 families were home educating in 1991

with a growth rate of 20% per annum. In New Zealand the situation is interesting and perhaps, more relevant to us in the UK. The authorities there accept that the education provided through home education is generally a good one with over 90% of students reviewed considered to be "taught at least as regularly and well as in a registered school" (ERO 2001)¹⁰. Moreover, in New Zealand parents can, if they wish, receive an annual stipend to home educate starting at about £290 for the first child and lesser amounts for second, third etc. child. The relevance of the New Zealand situation for us is that the make-up of the home education community bears a strong resemblance to our own with a good mix of religious and secular home educators.

However, the world leader is the USA, where the George Bush administration appears to lend strong support to the homeschool movement allowing the religious right to lead the way in the introduction of homeschooling legislation¹¹. For a good understanding of the US situation see Professor Stevens' book, 'Kingdom of Children' (Stevens 2001)¹². Former secretary of education William Bennett has said that¹³, "In the USA in 1994, the parents of about 700,000 school-age children made the decision to educate their children at home. This population is growing by about 15 percent each year, making the current number between 1.5 and 2 million home-schooled children – about 3 to 4 percent of school-age children nationwide. More important, the best available evidence suggests that most home-schooled children are getting an exceptional education." For insight into the US situation the work of Dr Brian Ray¹⁴ is informative although the reader should bear in mind that many of his samples are accessed through religious organisations.

Q5. Does financial standing make a big difference in home education?

Rothermel (2002) concluded from her research results that "poverty was not an indicator of poor academic outcomes where parents, whatever their situation, were committed to the children". There is some powerful government sponsored research that lends support to this finding¹⁵. Rothermel (2002) found that primary aged children from working class families participating in the academic strand of her research actually outperformed their middleclass counterparts. She speculated that such parents were less confident and more likely to strive to conform to national expectations.

Critics often cite money as necessary to home educate successfully but there is no academic research that shows less well off families are any less likely to be able to home educate. There is however, evidence from Rothermel's research that

less affluent families with less educated parents are likely to face a more challenging approach from their local education authority than their more affluent educated counterparts.

Q6. Are most parents who home educate qualified teachers or have they generally had a high level of education?

Rothermel (2002) found that 38% parents in her sample had been educated at comprehensive schools with at least 21% having no post-school qualifications. Surprisingly, whilst those parents who had attended university totalled 47.5%, a third had not (27.7%). Of the occupations listed, the largest group was schoolteachers and lecturers (13.5%) – those working in the arts coming next (11.7%). A surprising 10.2% of those in the study were people describing their work as 'manual' such as machinists, labourers, lorry drivers and factory workers. What the Rothermel study showed, for the first time, is that contrary to popular belief, home education is not the domain of the professional middle classes but includes families from across the socio-economic spectrum.

Dr Rothermel commented in her research, that there was evidence of 'less educated' parents resuming their own education with renewed vigour, once faced with the prospect of keeping pace with their children. Examples given were of parents attending classes with their children and taking up Open University courses.

Nevertheless, many home educators do have teaching experience, as evidenced by the 41% of Rothermel's sample who said that at least one parent was teacher trained.

Recent work by Fortune-Wood¹⁶ gives some insight into the socio-economic composition of home educators although the work should be read with the caveat that it is activist¹⁷, not academic, and the validity of the survey data is unsubstantiated.

Q7. What methods do home educating parents use?

Rothermel's research shows that home educating families adopt a flexible approach to education, believing that their children benefit from the freedom to develop their skills at their own speed. These children, she concluded, received a high level of parental attention although that input did not necessarily involve a curriculum or firm timetable.

She further suggested that the term 'home education' might be misleading as she found home to be a base from which activities were planned but there was no evidence to show that families used home in a way that school uses a classroom.

Dr Alan Thomas, an Australian scholar and Educational Psychologist, investigated learning methods in Australia and the UK, interviewing 100 parents, 23 of whom were from the Greater London area¹⁸. The qualitative data was subjected to content analysis to identify emergent themes. He discovered that families who started out with formal methods of learning found themselves drawn more and more to informal learning. Families who started out with informal learning soon found themselves adopting even more informal learning. The strict sequencing of learning material, the bedrock of learning in school, was seen increasingly as unnecessary, limiting and unhelpful.

Whilst Thomas' finding is supported by other research, Rothermel found that learning methodology could move in either direction, depending on the age, needs and individual characteristics of the child. Generally, those home educating from birth, having started so informally, tended to become more formal over time whilst those children withdrawing children from school moved first to informality before perhaps, reverting to some structure if and when the need for exam study approached.

Learning to read, one of the most common concerns of parents, drew this conclusion from Thomas in his study: "However informal their approach, parents are obviously concerned that their children learn to read and take steps to ensure that they do. Even so, a few did not insist when their children showed no inclination to learn. Curiously these children who learned to read relatively late still went on very quickly to read material suitable for their age. Most of the children were voracious readers."

Dr John Barratt-Peacock¹⁹, also in Australia conducted initial interviews with 186 families across Australia. Thirteen families were interviewed a second time and six families were interviewed a third time and observed for a full day each. He found that "families moved from formal to informal methods of educating over time with the major difference being that of degree of movement". Barratt-Peacock observed a range of families, from those who employed a tutor to those whose children were completely at liberty. The more formal families he found, tended to undertake formal work in the mornings leaving afternoons free for less formal pursuits. Central to his findings was the use of conversational learning, with families spending an average of 6.12 hours daily in conversation. Barratt-Peacock points out that even the lowest conversational time at 1.43 hours, far outstrips research showing that US teachers spend just seven minutes per day in personal exchanges with their students.

Despite his observations indicating that children were spending much of their days engaged in learning, Barratt-Peacock found concern amongst some families that their children were not learning enough or not spending enough time engaged in educational activity. Rothermel also found families who underestimated what their children were learning. She assessed a subgroup of participants in her research with academic tests, finding that parents were sometimes surprised by just how well their children did. She surmised that in the absence of peer outcomes for the parents to assess their children by, they inadvertently compared the children's attainment with adult expectations. Thus a child described as a non-reader at home may well have read well enough for their age group but poorly for an adult.

Q8. Do home educated children ever do as well academically as children who have been to school? Do they go on to further or higher education?

Paula Rothermel has studied the academic results of home educated primary aged children in the UK. Her research²⁰ included baseline assessment of 4-5 yr olds tested twice over a 'school' year. She was surprised to find that 64% of the children tested scored over 75% on the assessment, whereas nationally just 5.1% of children scored over 75%.

In her maths and literacy assessment of home educated children, Rothermel²¹ used national tests and results data to enable comparisons. She found that where 16% of schoolchildren nationally scored within the top attainment band, the same level was achieved by between 52% and 96% of the home educated children (over four age bands - 6,7,8 and 10 year olds). Rothermel does not suggest that home education is superior to school or that children educated at home are going to do better academically. In her research she attributes the home educated children's success largely to the parental input and commitment. This is not to say the parents sit by their children overseeing their 'schoolwork'. Rather, Rothermel notes that some of the children achieving these scores were learning in unstructured ways and with little, if any, work undertaken whilst sat down at a table. In her work she discusses children's ability to digest and incubate²² their ideas, allowing them to develop their ability to think and analyse for themselves. This process may be slower than taking in information through formal methods but is, perhaps, more durable²³. These ideas about children retaining and making use of information that they have come to for themselves is not new, and the work of psychologist Jean Piaget²⁴ supports this view. For a good read about informal learning and home education, consult Dr Thomas'

book, 'Children Learning at Home'. The real question from Paula Rothermel's work is not so much about why home educated children outperform school children, but rather, why some school children do so poorly. She poses the idea that the traditional school model may depress learning for some children, whilst the freedom of home education may enhance children's learning experience. Critics would argue that home educated children, i.e. children with committed parents, would all have done even better at school.

Most of the current research describing the academic attainment of older home educated children has taken place in the USA. Rudner (1999)²⁵ studied the academic outcomes of Christian children aged 5 - 18 years finding that their median scores were typically in the 70th to 80th (50th would be the norm). Rudner cautiously concludes that "home school students do quite well" explaining that his research did not consist of a controlled experiment

Ray (2003), outlined above, found that over 21% of home educated students had achieved a degree qualification compared to the national average of 12.05%. A further 50% had gone on to further education of some kind. Overall, the American study shows that 74% of home educated adults took college level courses compared to the national average of 46%.

There has been some debate in the UK over home educated children's access to further education and in a Westminster Adjournment Debate²⁶, the minister accepted that in accessing further education "The playing field should not be uneven" between schooled and home educated children.

In terms of access to university, of the thirty UK colleges and universities contacted by Trevena Whitbread²⁷ in her University research project, only three said that they would require certain qualifications, whilst the others have all said that it would depend on the candidate and that they would like to meet and discuss with them their achievements before any decision could be made.

Q9 Do home educated children suffer academically if they don't follow the national curriculum?

There is no research as yet that compares outcomes of home educated children who followed the national curriculum with those home educated children who did not. Until this omission is corrected it is the case that no one can say for sure whether or not home educated children are better off following the national curriculum. What we do know is that whilst home educators may refer to the national curriculum for guidance, 56.09% say they do not use it at all, with at least 26% describing it

as narrow and restrictive (Rothermel 2002). Yusof (2003)²⁸ in her research into how mathematics is taught by home educators found that, as far as maths is concerned, most parents "paid little attention to the national curriculum". Fortune-Wood found that just 2.5% of parents reported following it to the letter. The findings from these studies lend strong support to the idea that home educators enjoy their freedom and flexibility in creating a home education environment for their family.

Q10. What about research into school refusal school refusal ("phobia")?

The Education Otherwise (2003) research found that from the 820 children aged between 5 and 16 years referred to in the questionnaire returns, 423 had been withdrawn from school (51%). Of the 1186 responses (more than one reason box could be ticked) 74% indicated that it was the child's unhappiness which led to the withdrawal.

These days, "school phobia", once considered an illness requiring hospitalisation²⁹, is largely an anachronistic term implying that the child's fears are irrational (see Patricia Knox's book, 'Troubled Children'³⁰). These days it is generally accepted that there are usually valid reasons for children being unwilling to attend school, such as bullying or a family crisis.

EO has a wealth of case history showing that children who are removed from a school environment which distresses them go on to thrive in later life, functioning well as young adults in terms of relationships and work or continuing education. This is contrary to the reports of traditional treatment for school "phobia" and school refusal: Ian Berg[10], for instance, felt he had done well to end up with one third of his cohort (of 100) functioning well.

Q11. How does dyslexia respond to HE?

There is as yet no formal research on this aspect. EO's collection of case histories documents numerous instances of children with specific learning difficulties making good progress with literacy on withdrawal from school for home education. Knafle and Wescott (2005) have addressed literacy topics such as decoding, comprehension, favourite books, literature, vocabulary, grammar, spelling; their work may be of interest³¹.

Q12. What about Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)?

Children who have withdrawn from school seem to be more likely to have been assessed as having special needs than children who have not been to school, unless those parents are specifically seeking funding. Some home educating parents

simply prefer to accept and accommodate their child's behaviour without external input. Research by Reilly, Chapman, and O'Donoghue (2002)³² looked at case studies to examine how six Australian parents managed homeschooling with their children with disabilities. They found that parents were concerned with issues such as negative socialisation encountered in schools, insufficient academic progress and a failure by schools to understand their child's academic and social capabilities or the nature of their child's disability. They found that home educating parents were able benefit from a flexible structure with no set timetable that suited their individual child's needs.

Professor Lewis of the University of Birmingham has recently shown interest in home education and disability by highlighting issues that need addressing within the 'hidden economy' of home education provision³³. Further, in a written reply to the House of Commons Select Committee Special Educational Needs Inquiry 29 September 2005, Professor Lewis wrote of the need for, "systematic evidence about practice and impact of home education for disabled/SEN children"³⁴.

Rothermel (2002) found 22.54% of her sample to have special needs and similarly 19.87% of parents cited 'special needs' as a reason to home educate. Interestingly, questionnaire commentaries and interviews with families of such children indicated that, often, they home educated because of a family philosophy that would have led to home education regardless; particularly, it seemed, where a child experienced mild difficulties such as dyslexia. Significantly, when asked what home education meant to them, no families mentioned 'special needs'; indicative perhaps of the way that initial motivations were sidelined as the families found other benefits of home education (Appendix 5.3).

Q13. How does HE affect a child's social life and skills?

Rothermel (2002) evaluated, amongst other aspects, the psychosocial development of home educated children aged eleven years and under. She concluded that the children developed good social skills and that they integrated easily into a variety of social settings. Her questionnaire responses however, showed that of a number of parents (19%), believed their children would suffer if the parents did not find friends for them, although she concluded that this 'left out' feeling was a parental issue and not one echoed by the children during interviews; "When the children wanted company they mostly felt able to choose to spend time with, all or either, home educated friends,

school-friends and siblings. However location and transport could bring limitations³⁵.

Rothermel's investigation used, amongst other methods of enquiry, two traditional behaviour questionnaires - the Rutter Scale and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Overall the children's behaviour could be defined as 'normal' but there were differences in the results between the two scales. Rothermel concluded that the use of test instruments normalised on school children (as they generally are) should be viewed with caution because such results may well be skewed when used with electively non-schooled children.

The best paper to refer to for a discussion of children's social skills is Rothermel (2006)³⁶. This paper brings together some of the most recent thinking and research on this topic.

In some of the latest US research, Medlin (in press³⁷) examined social skills in 70 home educated children, hypothesizing that home educated children's scores on the self-reported *Social Skills Rating System (SSRS)*, would be higher than those of the schoolchildren forming the 1,170 test standardization sample. Medlin found that the home educated children in his study described themselves as more cooperative, assertive, empathetic and self-controlled than the schoolchildren did, making their scores consistently higher than those of the schoolchildren. In percentile terms the home educated children scored an average of 71.5 points across all four of the social skills areas tested (cooperation,, assertiveness, empathy, and self-control). Basing his conclusion on his own and previous research Medlin concluded that home educated children's social skills are "exceptional".

In terms of looking back on the social side of home education in adulthood, Professor Gary Knowles of the University of Michigan conducted a study in 1991³⁸ of 53 adults who had been home educated. He found that more than 75% of the sample felt that home education had actually helped them to interact with people from different levels of society. In 2003 the US based Home School Legal Defense Association commissioned the largest survey to date of adults who were home educated³⁹. Describing this research Rothermel (2006) writes, "Ray (2003) surveyed over 7,300 home educated adults 5,000 of whom had been home educated for at least seven years. Ray found that whilst only 37% of US adults participated in community activities, 71% of the home educated adults were involved in such activities. Asked about job satisfaction, 61% in contrast with 40% of schooled adults said they were very satisfied with their jobs. Addressing the criticism that home educated children will grow up resentful at having been

isolated from their school going peers, Ray found that 95% of the homeschool adults were pleased to have been home educated, adding that their education had not hindered them in terms of either career or education. He found that 74% of the 812 participants who had children of school age were home educating their own children. Ray concluded, "homeschooling produces successful adults who are actively involved in their communities and who continue to value education for themselves and their children" (Ray, 2003 p.6).

Most recently in Europe, Spiegler (2005)⁴⁰ concluded that; there is no causal link between schooling and social competence, that family background is influential in social development, that the main difference between schooling and family socialization is not quality but the range - that is, there can be better and worse of each; and that families who positively support the development of social competence and education are predominant amongst home educators.

Q14. Is Home Education enjoyable?

The growing numbers tend to suggest the answer as being yes. The Rothermel questionnaire results revealed "that 35% of parents found home educating far more fun than they could have imagined." Ray (2003) found that questioned about their happiness, 59% of home educated adults as opposed to 28% of school educated adults said they were "very happy" with life and whilst 73% as opposed to 47% of school educated adults said that they found life exciting. Asked about their view on having been home educated, 95.2% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I was glad I homeschooled" and 82.1% said they would homeschool their own children. This showed some continuity with the earlier work of Knowles (1991) who found that of his 53 adults who had been homeschooled 96% said that if they could live their life over again they would still want to be home educated.

Q15. Do home educated children go on to home educate?

In the UK Dr Webb (1999)⁴¹ carried out follow-up interviews with twenty adults previously interviewed as children. Only about 30% of the sample contemplated home education for their own children; a finding that contrasts sharply with Knowles (1991) who found that all seven homeschooled parents he interviewed had chosen to homeschool their own children⁴². One family was in its third generation of homeschoolers. Webb, however, explained that many of her sample believed that their parents had made 'sacrifices' that they in turn, would not wish to make. The

sample was positive about their home education, believing they had benefited from the experience.

Q. 16 Do home educated children become responsible adults?

The main references here are Knowles (1991), Webb (1999) and Ray (2003). These authors all suggest that a home education can lead into a responsible adulthood. There is no available research that indicates otherwise.

Ray's (2003) quantitative look at this issue with his largely Christian survey population reveals that 98.5% of home educated adults had read a book in the last 6 months against 69% of general population; 4.2% found politics and government too complicated to understand as against 35% of general population; 90.3% of the homeschooled adults used a public library or public library programme in the last year against 56% general population; 6.2% felt their family had no say in what federal government does as opposed to 44% of the general population; 99.6% of homeschooled adults knew how to use the internet as opposed to 37% of general population; and 71.1% of his sample engaged in some form of community activity as opposed to 37% of general population.

Q17. How is HE regarded by educationalists?

The special 'Home Education' issue of *Evaluation & Research in Education*⁴³ includes an article by Dr Paula Rothermel that counters the stereotyping of home education families, proposing instead a classification by experience that describes how families that practice home education come from all sorts of backgrounds but change and develop with time. Papers in the special issue by Monk (2005) and Lubienski (2005)⁴⁴ both provide views of how home education is perceived by the wider legal and educational academic community. Writing in Cooper (2005 ed)⁴⁵ Michael Apple, the prominent US critical educational theorist gives a strong critique⁴⁶ whilst Hardenbergh⁴⁷, in the same volume responds. These articles highlight the tensions between individual and state experienced by many home educators in dealing with educational authorities. All independent research should be read carefully with consideration given to counter positions.

Q18. Finally, this leaflet has mentioned lots of research but how do I find out more?

Armed with one of the references cited here or in other articles you may have read, go to your local library and complete an inter library loan form requesting a copy of the research you have read about. This is just like asking for a book from another library. Any article you have read in any journal or magazine should be available in this

way. The fee is usually 50 pence and less for concessions. University libraries offer the same service but usually charge about £5.

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