Please cite the Published Version

Additional Information: This is an open access article published in Educationalfutures, by the British Education Studies Association.

Home and Alternative Education as Places of Emotional Refuge

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Abstract

Numbers of home and alternatively educated children are increasing rapidly in the UK. This paper explores how the growing number of home and alternatively educating parents in the UK, find or create refuges for themselves and their children. The properties of these refuges are examined drawing upon concepts from Reddy (1999, 2001) and Bourdieu (1990, 2000). Qualitative data from twenty parents who were currently home or alternatively educating, had done so in the past or were considering it were collected and analysed using constructivist grounded theory methods. The findings indicated that parental reasons for seeking out alternative educational provision usually involved the avoidance of various aspects of the UK school system. It concludes with the observation that the education market seems to be responding to parental concerns, for example by offering forest school activities and the establishment of state funded Steiner and Montessori schools.

Keywords

home education, home schooling, alternative education, emotional refuge, illusio

Link to Article

https://educationstudies.org.uk/?p= 12891

Introduction

Once again, home education has drawn the gaze of the UK government and media. This time, however, not only is education in the home under scrutiny, but also that in

unregistered schools and study centres. The Channel 4 investigative programme 'Dispatches' - broadcast on 4th February 2019 - was hosted by Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield and was based on her report entitled 'Skipping School: Britain's Invisible Children'. The report particularly highlighted children that were withdrawn from school for reasons such as having special educational or behavioural needs. The families it focussed on were new to home education and for them it was a last resort. The final emphasis in her investigation was on illegal and unregistered schools operating in inappropriate buildings such as office blocks. This triggered numerous responses from home education advocates such as expressed in the *Times Education Supplement* article: 'Project Fear on home education must end' (Hardy, 2019). The author, a former home educator, believes the Children's Commissioner "sought to persuade the general public that home education was a danger to children because parents cannot be trusted with their own children" (Hardy, 2019: np).

Despite this atmosphere of suspicion, in countries such as the UK, Canada and the USA, home education is becoming an increasingly legitimised choice; with some US states containing more home educated than privately educated children (Aurini and Davies, 2005). The UK is one of the few countries in Europe where home education is largely unregulated, and local authorities (LAs) are only officially aware of those who have voluntarily registered, or children who have removed from the school roll. There is no requirement to register with the LA if the parents have never applied for their child to attend a school, while LA inspectors may carry out home visits but allowing access to the home is not obligatory (Webb, 2001). The recently updated government guidelines provide clarification on how school attendance orders must be issued if families fail to provide evidence that a suitable and efficient education is being provided at home (DfE, 2019). Of course, the opinions of LA inspectors are subjective, and one individual's perceptions of 'efficient' educational provision may not be of the same standard as another.

Numbers of home-educated children registered with their local authority doubled in England in the five years preceding 2018 and increased by 27% between 2017 and 2018 (ADCS, 2018). The total reported by the 132 local authorities out of 152 that responded to the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) 2019 survey was 47,464 (estimate for all LAs being 54,656). As there is no compulsory registration process in England, many more children are not included in this number. Data on home educated children registered with their local authority showed the majority to be of upper primary or secondary school age (UK key stages 2, 3 and 4) (ADCS, 2018). Those parents that gave a reason cited dissatisfaction with the school or concerns for

their child's emotional health. Parents declaring that they are home educating while they wait for a place in their preferred school to avoid fines, or prevent the child's exclusion from school, were also identified in the report.

There is little research on the factors that influence the decision-making process, particularly in parents of pre-school and early primary aged children. This group is under-researched and Lees (2013) is of the opinion that the concept of education outside of school is very weak amongst academics and policy makers. A major government review of elective home education (Badman, 2009) criticised research on the outcomes of home education and resulted in many home education groups becoming suspicious of researcher interest. It also had the unintended effect of advertising home education in the press and strengthening the views of its proponents (Fensham-Smith, 2017).

In April 2018, the UK government published 'elective home education: a call for evidence', a public consultation seeking information and suggestions relating to the registration and monitoring of home educated children. The opening point was that 'the government intends to safeguard the primary duty of parents to lead their children's education, including home education. It does not intend that the state should supplant this parental role' (DfE, 2018: 5). The authors stated that they believe most parents are educating their children well, but acknowledge that new issues have arisen, such as unregistered schools and raised concerns about religious radicalisation and the safeguarding of children.

Home education as a refuge

The concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2000) may help to explain why contemporary parents may wish to utilise home schooling as a refuge. Our experiences of the world are imprinted from childhood to form our *habitus;* they are the "…active presence of past experiences" (Bourdieu, 1990:54). Not only does our *habitus* include preferences and bodily dispositions but also how we perceive the world. The *habitus* drives individuals to create places where they feel at home, driven by "…sympathies and antipathies, affections and aversions, tastes and distastes" (Bourdieu, 2000:150). Drawing upon the ideas of Bourdieu, Threadgold (2020) proposes that negative and positive experiences of a setting lead to "sticky affinities" (Threadgold, 2020: 103) which drive what we are pulled toward or pushed away from.

The *habitus* is not static but has fluidity; it is possible to change our *habitus*, but this requires effort. *Habitus* provides society with a sort of stability because history tends

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to repeat itself as each generation reproduces the *habitus* of the preceding one. This does not necessarily mean that there is determinism however, as Bourdieu believes the *habitus* can be changed or controlled as a result of "…awakening of consciousness and socioanalysis" (Jenkins, 1992: 83). Arguably, parents in previous studies who opted for home education were judged to be demonstrating reflexivity in seeking to change the *habitus* of their children, driven by their aversion to their local mainstream schools, or negative opinions of the education system as a whole (see Rothermel, 2003; Mountney, 2009; Morton, 2011; Lees, 2013).

One potential source of unhappiness that may lead someone to seek refuge is a sense of emotional suppression. Historian William Reddy (2001) provides a framework that explains how individuals navigate feelings, proposing that rules and structures in different societies control emotions via *emotional regimes*. These suppress some individuals, and if emotions and opinions cannot be publicly expressed it can lead to what Reddy terms *emotional suffering.* *Emotional refuges* are places where people can express themselves freely, without the constraints that bear down on them from the rest of society. When the number of individuals making use of *emotional refuges* rapidly increases, they can end up becoming the norm. Reddy (2001) provides the example of the strict *emotional regime* of King Louis XIV leading to meetings of sentimentalists and romantics in salons, where people could discuss ideas away from the strict hierarchical rules that divided groups in society and prevented free interaction. "For a few decades, emotions were deemed to be as important as reason in the foundation of states and the conduct of politics" (Reddy, 2001: 143). Reddy's (2001) ideas help explain how small collectives can grow and alter history. In recent times, the development of technologies that allow virtual refuges to exist and instant international communication is a factor in the growth of these spaces. The framework of navigating emotions is powerful in helping understand how and why *emotional refuges* form. It does not, however acknowledge the fact that unless financially independent or provided with resources, individuals cannot remain in refuges permanently and most will need to re-enter society.

Another potential reason for parents opting for home education can be further explained by Bourdieu's use of the term *illusio.* This conceptualises the phenomenon of individuals having an interest in the meaning of the game (Bourdieu, 1990).

> "If we are to avoid experiencing life as meaningless, humans have to create meaning and then invest in those socially constructed and contextually specific meanings to make life livable. Illusio is a shared sense of purpose

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within a field but becomes one's own sense of purpose once invested"
(Threadgold, 2018:162).

Thus, an *illusio* is maintained and reproduced along with *habitus.* For instance, in schools that place of lot of emphasis on qualifications, prizes and certificates, pupils learn to value external symbols of success and follow rules. This continues after they have entered the workplace, where promotions and high-status jobs are the goal of many of their contemporaries. Parental expectations of success in certain, valued careers tend to lead to the continuation of social classes that are reproduced generation upon generation. Interestingly, Bourdieu, like Reddy (2001), mentions the word 'suffering' in that the fulfilment of the parental desires of *illusio* "…generally carries on without crises or conflict, though this does not mean without psychological or physical suffering" (Bourdieu, 2000: 165).

Methods

The principles of constructivist grounded theory were followed closely during this study. Charmaz (2006) uses the analogy of a broad lens giving an overview of a landscape and then different lenses used to focus closer and closer in on a particular aspect. In grounded theory methods, the research questions are not pre-determined but rather decided later depending on what was expressed as most important in the participants' experiences. The data driven by questions asked in the subsequent interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) adhered to standard university ethical guidelines with all participants reading an information sheet and giving written consent.

Five home educating parents whose children attended a part-time alternative provider volunteered for exploratory interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to determine the direction of the inquiry; this was a convenience sample, as the researcher had access to the setting.

Once themes were identified, theoretical sampling led to local and nationwide recruitment of individuals making use of other types of alternative provision, flexi schooling and fully home educating. Some parents were just starting to consider home education, making it possible to track their decision-making journey over two years. The final round of theoretical sampling recruited parents who were considering home education but had changed their mind, in order to investigate further the factors involved in decision-making. Including the exploratory interviews, 27 interviews took place with 20 parents of children between three and fourteen years of age. The older children in the study had previously been home educated or their parents had

considered it when they were in the lower primary years. In this study the Parents are given the designation P1, P2 etc.

The interviews took place through a combination of face-to-face, telephone and Skype interviews, in addition to some email responses. Focussed coding and constant comparative analysis were carried out as themes began to emerge (Charmaz, 2006). Relationships between the categories were investigated to construct a substantive theory of the process, while extant theoretical concepts were integrated to deepen and enrich the grounded theory (Urquhart, 2013). The complete grounded theory (Adamson, in press) is not presented here as the focus is the data concerning home and alternative education as refuges.

Findings and discussion

The findings are presented in sub-sections that explore the properties of the spaces found or created by home and alternatively educating parents.

Reasons for seeking refuge

The participants in this study appear to be seeking refuge from various aspects of the UK education system. They expressed a wide range of examples to illuminate this concept. Strongly phrased specific statements such as avoiding Foucault's (1977) notion of bio-power and control, as well as more general observations such as the 'battleground' of the school run were given. Most comments lay somewhere in-between and regarded the school environment itself, e.g. having large numbers of tests, the reward/punishment methods and the influence of other children. The data suggest that the participants were trying to resist the control of the rules and regulations of the school system: for example, having to take children on holiday at prescribed times, criticism for wanting an anxious child to go in late or the infliction of compulsory uniform at the age of four. P1 referred to schools as being like a regime, while P4 found the school unsympathetic when his daughter was late for school due to anxiety, stating:

> "There is the knock on effect the system has the restraints on time: you've got to get them in at a certain time. Now you're financially punished if you don't get them in on time."

Bourdieu (2000) writes about the state orchestrating the *habitus* and gives an example to which many can relate: 'the major rhythms of the social calendar, especially that of

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school holidays' (Bourdieu, 2000:175). This sentiment is echoed in the quotation from P6 below:

> "I didn't want her to go at four, which I thought was insane. To be in uniform, to be regulated, to be in class. To be told what we do when, when to go on holiday."

The participants seem to perceive home and alternative spaces as refuges where children can develop at their own pace, follow their interests, play and enjoy family time. Some parents view home education as a way to prolong the time that the child has already spent learning and developing at home, while those not completely against school simply wished to lengthen this phase. They were willing to consider school when they considered the child ready. Human geographer Kraftl (2013a) carried out a case study of home educating families and surmised that parents who home educated were likely to mention breastfeeding, attachment parenting and child-led weaning. Arguably, the rise in attachment parenting could also be contributing to the feeling in parents that their children are too small to go to school. Indeed, Canadian researchers Aurini and Davies (2005) believe that "As this culture of intensive parenting grips the middle class, it is, in turn channelling a greater variety of parents into home schooling" (: 470). The findings of the current study are very similar in this regard.

In the UK, the school year begins in early September and summer born children being less likely to succeed has been a hot topic in the press. In 2015 for example, The Telegraph ran an article 'Why Summer Born Children Are Scarred for Life'. The article describes the Everetts, whose eldest child was a born in summer with their child's birthday being at the very end of August. This led to comments from friends about the possibility of them lagging behind as they would be one of the youngest in the year group. One of our study subjects, P9 perceived her daughter as too small for full-time attendance, stating she sometimes became tearful due to tiredness. There is a change in routine and family dynamics when a child goes to school. P12 wished she could retain closeness between siblings and decided to remove her eldest daughter from school despite her being happy there. The school run disrupting family life and the resulting stress was a concern of three of the participants. This type of stress experienced by both parent and child are examples of *emotional suffering,* especially if they cannot freely express their emotions*.*

Some parents described and unsettledness or gut feeling about school. This could be due to a negative past experience, or a sense that the child's needs will not be met,

suggesting that the parent is drawing upon their experience of the world to anticipate how their child will feel. This discomfort is another example of *emotional suffering*; perhaps the extreme expression of this was in P1, who stated she felt fear at the thought of her son going through similar experiences to herself. This fear motivated her to move country and establish an alternative learning community.

An environment in which others can influence their child may also be seen as negative by some parents. Some feel that the child's natural personality will be repressed by having to conform to cultural stereotypes, such as P12's daughter changing her opinion of her favourite TV characters after being told by others that they were for boys. Black home educators in Fields-Smith and Williams' 2009 study were seen to be trying to avoid their children being racially stereotyped, even by teachers and Lois (2009) presented the example of a mother who was determined that her son would be able to express emotions in a healthy way. To such parents, psychological harm is arguably as damaging as physical harm. These parents are highly motivated to avoid *emotional suffering* in themselves and provide a comfortable, stimulating learning environment for their child. Seeking out or creating personal spaces where ideas can be freely expressed is the focus of the next section.

Discovering or creating refuges

As shown in the grounded theory 'Stepping out of the System?' (Adamson, in press), some parents will overcome large obstacles to find suitable educational provision or even create their own. By moving from her native country to home educate in the UK, P1 made a major, yet private protest, in the belief that mainstream schools should be shut down and replaced by something 'more organic'. The relative ease of setting up an alternative education environment in the UK was the sole reason for her move. P8 provided forest schooling for the local primary school one day a week (for which she voluntarily retrained after leaving a financially rewarding career). She gave her time freely until the head teacher refused to let her children take an extra day out of school. Her attempt to combine traditional schooling and alternative provision may have influenced the school and other parents; however, the school's refusal to accommodate her requests for more time meant she withdrew her children completely. P13 moved her family across the country to gain a place at a state-funded Steiner school. These are examples of participants finding or creating physical *emotional refuges*.

The obstacles and suffering faced by the participants in this study are relatively minor but others moving to the UK from abroad have left belongings as well as family and

friends: 'We had to get to safety to protect our family. We can never go back. If we do, our children will be removed, as the German government says they are the property of the state now' (Francis-Pape and Hall, 2008). The *emotional regime* is not necessarily written in the law of the land in countries such as Germany and China where home education is illegal. However, there may be written and unwritten rules of school, such as the curriculum, uniform, rewards and sanctions.

> "As she was about to move from the baby group into the toddler group I was realising they were teaching and I didn't like the way they were doing it and the discipline. I really didn't like it. I was reading about alternative parenting" (P6).

This participant resolved her issues by finding a childminder who began to home educate her daughter alongside her own. After a year of illnesses and separation anxiety at nursery, the little girl flourished in the home and outdoor environment. Not only did she feel the child benefited, but P6 felt relief and could concentrate more on her work. The childminder's home became a refuge as the parent shared very similar ideologies about attachment parenting and education. P6 felt excluded from other home education groups as she worked full time and they tended to meet during the day.

Properties of their refuges

Once the parents have 'stepped out of the system', they and their child(ren) inhabit an alternative space; either physical or virtual. The concepts provided by Reddy (1999, 2001) and Bourdieu (1990, 2000) help explain the properties of these spaces. The various refuges presented here share themes of comfort/avoiding discomfort, common ideas and unwritten rules, with the first two being attributes that confer a positive feeling and the third being a possible source of tension. These factors help explain the reasons parents may be drawn to specific spaces and whether they or their child remain in them.

Comfort/avoiding discomfort

Most parents who remove their children from school, or do not send them in the first place appear to experience a feeling of relief. Their discomfort may be due to anxiety that the child will be unsafe, or that school will affect his or her development in some way. Following 'gut feelings' drives some parents to make dramatic changes to their circumstances but not all are able to do so. "Emotional claims are often made in the context of goal conflict. One wants to go camping, but bears have been seen in the

woods" (Reddy, 2001:323). To continue with one's desires in these circumstances results in *emotional suffering*. Goal conflict present in the data was evident when home educating parents wanted their child to attend alternative provision but could not afford it. Alternatively, their partner did not approve of their ideas. *Emotional liberty,* according to Reddy (2001), is achieved when goals are dropped or adapted and *emotional suffering* relieved.

Another example of comfort is evident in the findings where parents do not try to explain their choices to those who will not understand. The discovery of like-minded people in virtual or actual spaces provides validation, and knowing they are not the only one with these ideas is reassuring. Venues where individuals can express feelings and opinions without negative judgement are termed *emotional refuges* by Reddy (2001). It can be argued that one of the reasons these spaces feel more relaxed is that they are free from the *illusio* that is common in mainstream society. Alternatively, the *illusio* is less likely to cause pressure and stress. According to Bourdieu (2000), individuals take a break from *illusio* by participating in 'free-time' activities that are non-competitive, such as family time and holidays, though even these can have some pressure attached; Bourdieu provides examples such as bringing back souvenirs and a suntan. More recently, this has become the sharing of selfie photographs as evidence we have visited desirable locations.

Home education contains many contradictions, being 'both frowned upon and politically championed' (Pattison, 2015: 634). P5 believed she unsettled friends who accepted the default position of mainstream schooling. Pattison (2015) writes that both physical disruption and conceptual disturbance occurs as home education challenges definitions of both home and school. P13 made the decision not to talk about her thoughts on home education with those who would not understand, including her parents, while P12 stopped discussing it with her best friend after receiving a tirade of derogatory comments about her choice. This is an example of *emotional suffering* as individuals feel distressed when their own friends and family do not respect their choice.

Another example of *emotional suffering* is the commonly reported situation of outsiders labelling home educating parents as irresponsible. This can lead to parents feeling judged and withholding their opinions in public. Although P5 gained new friends due to her decision to home educate; she isolated herself from others.

> "What really, really helped me was knowing lots of other people do it. Yes,
> you are stepping outside of the norm and it's frightening to do that, it really

is, you'll find for a lot of home ed people, especially for me. I was posting articles to say 'school this, home ed that' almost reinforcing the decision. I've lost friends due to home ed, been defriended, well not because of home ed but being outspoken about it."

Lois (2009) found her participants were used to having to defend their status as a good mother. She uses the term 'maternal deviance' to describe the mothers' actions. The characteristics of being a good mother, such as love, concern and sacrifice are perceived as being extreme in home-schooling mothers. These parents, like the ones in the current study, are used to defending their decision. Some home educators suggest retorts for others to use on advice forums and many have documented criticisms they have fielded such as on the World Travel Family Blog (Alyson, 2019).

Common ideas

Parents who choose alternatives to school could be described as having a lack of affinity to, or even a repulsion from the easily accessible mainstream provision. Bourdieu and Waquant (1992) used metaphors such as 'gravity' to elaborate on the notion of the field having pulls and pushes. The participants in this study look to find somewhere suitable and to which they have an affinity e.g. a school with outdoor space or a local home education group. Alternatively, they create their own refuge by educating the child themselves or establishing non-mainstream provision. Finding that there were groups of home educating families locally gave P4 and his ex-partner P3 support for their decision. P16 managed to find a group composed of home educators and those considering it:

> "At that point when we decided that was what we'd want to consider, we had a look round locally to see if anything was happening and to meet people that were making the same kind of decision so we could try it on for size, people that were further along their journey."

Groups that share common beliefs and goals experience positive affect. These groups do not have to meet face to face: for example, Gee's (2004) notion of affinity spaces illustrates bonds formed by individuals sharing interests online. If the ideologies of the group are in alignment with their own then a feeling off connectedness might be expected. In the landscape of home education, however it is more complicated than simply having shared ideas. Morton (2010) highlighted divisions between different types of home educators and believed those she classified as 'natural' to be suspicious of other types. Collective justification was used by the 'natural' group of home educators, some of whom viewed the system as oppressive and built to produce

obedient workers to "…feed the capitalist industrial project" (Morton, 2010:49). Morton believed many of the parents to have not even read the authors they quoted.

Members of home education groups do not always confer a feeling of inclusion. P18 found that people were not engaging with her online and when she moved to Belfast, she found home educating people had very different views on issues such as religion and politics. She found she was on the 'same page' as the NCT mums. This finding is verified by Fensham-Smith's (2017) in that home education groups can be exclusionary and cliquey. People who possess different opinions to the moderators may not be integrated into the group. Having 'stepped out' of the schooling system, parents find themselves having to comply with the rules of this new group of people.

The participants with fond memories of past school days that were less formal have a *habitus* that conflicts with their expectations that modern schooling that is subject to a strict curriculum and compulsory testing. What they value does not match what they imagine their children will experience. For those with negative attitudes about school, their *habitus* provides them with a vision that school will still possess these attributes. They aim to provide a different environment for their children. Once P20 visited her local school, she discovered that the head teacher shared her values concerning testing, thus her anxiety was relieved. Her goals were adapted, and as Reddy (2001) predicted *emotional liberty* resulted.

Having shared ideas leads to a feeling of comfort and belonging. These spaces are not always free from conflict nor are they fully autonomous however. This leads to the final property of the refuges: unwritten rules.

Unwritten rules

The *emotional regime* could be the law of a country e.g. where home education is illegal, or it could be that members of the public frown upon those not making use of mainstream schools. The fact that access to colleges is reliant on having taken certain exams could be deemed to be properties of a regime, as the children without are deemed to be inferior and are denied access. They are not considered to be 'playing the game' and do not have the symbols of achievement that society requires to access the next level. Bourdieu (1977) termed the taken for granted rules of society *doxa.*

Most home and alternatively educating parents desire eventual academic success and good careers for their children but they often place the child's happiness as their top priority. They reject the mainstream investment in *illusio,* instead expressing and valuing a different type such as individualism and childhood experiences. Like in these

data however, Morton (2010) found home educators who also expressed the contradiction of their children being free to follow their own path but also having to earn a living. The opposite of buying in to an *illusio* is indifference. The participants in this study certainly do not show a lack of investment, they are investing a lot of time and money in their child.

Dissonance between the values held by the parents, and what society perceives to be important are prevalent in the data. When choosing schools to apply for, the majority of parents in the general population look for high academic standards (Gorard, Fitz and Taylor, 2003). Schools strive to do well in the league tables and Ofsted inspections and proudly display the results on websites/prospectuses. Those in the data considering home or alternative education, however, are looking for other things, such as outdoor space, creativity and a culture that is not focussed on testing and external rewards. They wish for their child to be considered as an individual and feel that mainstream schools have a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

The unwritten rules of a refuge could be confining in themselves and the parents could potentially end up 'caged' by them. Stepping out of mainstream education but into alternatives such as the Steiner group of schools also brings with it a set of rules and regulations. Private Steiner Schools and free schools do not need to follow the national curriculum, but they are, however, subject to inspections. State-funded schools, including the one P13 moved across the country for her son to attend, were heavily criticised by Ofsted (Williams, 2019) and subsequent to her interview her desired school was taken over by a multi-academy trust. These schools are part of two, often conflicting systems.

Steiner schools have philosophies such as not making use of computers until secondary age and an in-house physical and music activity called eurhythmy. Teachers stay with one class for up to eight years and develop their own curriculum (Steinerwaldorf.org): these differences, amongst others, from mainstream schools make up the *illusio* of the field of Steiner education.

> "It's just a bit more natural I suppose. Rather than stimulating toys, it's about keeping them calmer...lots of rituals in Steiner like specific songs they sing every season, so every season it changes. So at the moment we are singing winter songs and all the decorations around the room are blue and white and wintery. The outdoor activities are collecting winter stuff like pine cones and things. It's really lovely" (P13).

Unwritten rules are also present in home education forums and website groups. Sanctions such as being ostracised or banned for expressing opinions that go against the grain have been recorded in some home-education circles (Fensham-Smith, 2017). The *illusio* of the online home education groups may be that they all value the child's individual development as a successful outcome. A common distrust of local authorities and the government as a whole is expected as an opinion.

Home educators committed to an unstructured approach buy into the benefits of learning naturally through life. They reject the traditions and symbols prevalent in mainstream schools. Alternatively, they may feel they have indifference to mainstream educational *illusio* as they refuse to play the game. Arguably, their children, however, will eventually need to know the rules.

Is the market responding?

Home education is beginning to move from a marginalised position to one of reverence where parents are now often respected for the effort they are dedicating to their children. The isolated protests of a very small number of families have increased to the extent that in some countries it is no longer an unusual choice. Aurini and Davies (2015) believe there is evidence to show home education to be entering the mainstream e.g. by legislative changes in the US and Canada and recently Canadian Universities altering their admission policies.

Schools have websites on which they proudly advertise their performance in exams, sporting and cultural achievements. Prospectuses are glossy and professionally made. Responding to parents' desire for their children to be outdoors, increasing numbers of state primary schools have started to advertise themselves as 'forest schools'. Upon the discovery of a nursery with forest activities, P20 felt very happy to send her daughter. Certain principles must be adhered to for the school to be regarded as a true forest school (Sackville-Ford, 2019) and the rise in schools offering these sessions has been greeted with some scepticism. An example of this can be seen a Guardian online article stating that forest school may be used as a marketing gimmick (Lightfoot, 2019).

There are now increasing numbers of independent schools that follow the philosophies of Montessori and Steiner. The small number of state funded Steiner schools in England proved to be very popular. P13 found people at a forest school session near her chosen Steiner School were aware of its far-reaching attraction.

> "At one of them before I'd even mentioned the school she said people keep moving from London and pushing the house prices up so now people from Frome can't afford it."

At the time of writing, this school had been taken over by a multi-academy trust as a result of an inadequate Ofsted grading.

Findhorn, a democratic school in Scotland offers refuges in the form of 'sanctuaries' for meditation and time in nature. Steiner schools provide a 'womb-like' atmosphere with their careful choice of natural materials and pastel colours (Kraftl, 2013b). Most of the parents in this study were not against schools completely and many wished to 'tunnel between' the metaphorical grooves (Adamson, in press). Some schools permit flexi schooling although this was not available to most participants after their child reached compulsory school age.

> "I still really wish that flexi-schooling was an option [...]My heart says get her out of there, but my head says we can't afford for that to happen (P9 email)."

This heart/head divide is also *emotional suffering*. It also encompasses the dichotomy of those parents wanting their children to be successful in society whilst not striving for external rewards. *Emotional suffering* occurs when "high priority goals are in conflict" (Reddy, 1999: 272).

P15 flexi-schooled her daughter after a period of home education and the daughter requested more days in school each year until she became full-time (the child did not have enough girls of her own age in the home education groups). The same option was not available for P15's son as the school Head had changed. She believed flexi-schooling used to be more common but is now 'frowned upon'. Frustration at the school's inflexible approach could also be heard in P8's interviews, she was providing forest school activities on a voluntary basis one day a week and her request to remove her children for an extra day a week was turned down. This resulted in her removing her child completely and setting up alternative provision.

Kraftl (2013b) has thoroughly explored the connection and disconnection between alternative learning spaces and mainstream organisations. He believes it is not a binary and that research in the past has positioned alternative education as different to the mainstream. Examples include children dipping in and out of spaces or being in one temporarily e.g. for a 'dose' of forest school for children at risk of exclusion. Rather than being seen as alternative to the mainstream, these educators strive to be

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autonomous. Kraftl (2013b) found that very few educators wanted to remain separate and the vast majority were "…part of something *bigger*" (Kraftl, 2013b: 117). Perhaps not 'out of the system' but just not under its control.

Conclusion and implications

While the numbers of home and alternatively educated children are rapidly increasing in the UK, government recommendations to implement a registration process appear no closer to become law. This leaves serious concerns about unregistered and illegal schools operating in an unregulated and potentially harmful manner. In this paper, it is proposed that parents wish to escape the 'system' to seek *emotional refuge* for themselves and their children. The refuges are from various aspects of control implemented in schools; from the testing and reward system to the influence of others and the chaotic school run. Properties the refuges have in common include providing a feeling of comfort, shared ideas with other members and unwritten rules. The unwritten rules may be indicative of a form of *illusio* within the refuges that differs from the rest of society. Alternatively, parents may be seeking a temporary break from the *illusio* for their child. The rise in parents wanting their child to 'step out of the system' may be indicative of a wider problem in society. The feeling that the high-stakes, competitive environment for children and teachers is causing some form of distress.

By providing sites of *emotional refuge* in the school day, perhaps parents would feel there is respite for their children. Rather than withdrawing from 'the system', this could help to build resilience. This is particularly important in the case of older children who are being removed from school due to mental health problems and even self-harm. More research is needed about children who refuse to attend school and end up being home educated as a result.

One recommendation from this research is that *emotional refuges* could be incorporated into schools. This could be via the forest schooling movement or simply by allowing more time free from the pressures of examinations, rewards and sanctions. These spaces would allow a step away from the *illusio*. Kraftl (2013b) suggests that the move from indoor to outdoor spaces gives children a chance to breathe out, providing a well-earned break for the minds of our young people.

Acknowledgements

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e-journal of the British Education Studies Association, ISSN: 1758-2199
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