“Investigating the social aspects of home-schooling”

by
Alicia Perkins and Ami Sanderson
with
Martin Woodhead

Introduction

Our project started off with Alicia who was interested in finding out about home-schooling. She was interested because it was something that she didn’t think was that common, so she wanted to find out more about it. We were also not sure if they had a teaching curriculum with the same time and pattern as children in a state school, or if they did whatever they wanted (if they could choose which lessons they learnt and when in the day/week). Ami then got interested and together, with a bit of help and discussion, we decided to do the social aspects – whether being home schooled affected the friendships with other children and adults such as their parents. As few people had researched home schooling, it was another good reason to choose this subject. So eventually we decided on the research question for our project, which is:

How do social opportunities differ between state schooling and home-schooling?

Methodology

We were at the Open University Children’s Research Centre for about 20 weeks. Many of the weeks were spent learning about research including – research ethics, quantitative and qualitative methods, experimental design, observation, interviews and questionnaires. We then went onto our own research projects and we were assigned Martin as our research assistant. We decided to carry out an interview study with home schooled children and their parents.

We wanted to find some children and their families close to where we live who would be willing to take part in an interview. We looked on the internet for relevant sites, such as Education Otherwise, for information on where to find these people. Eventually we got in touch with a local coordinator whose daughter is home educated. Through this coordinator we found other children and parents who could participate in the study.

We carried out interviews with three families.

Eleanor, aged 12 and her mother Felicity. Eleanor, an only child, had been home-educated all her life.
Fiona, aged 15 and her mother Jackie. Fiona has two younger siblings who go to school. She was in school until the age of 14. Jamie, aged 13, Laura, aged 11, their mother Tina and father Terry. Jamie came out of school at about the age of 12 – 13. Laura was home schooled but then decided to go to school. (all names changed to protect their identity)

We designed a structured interview, with questions for children and their parents. The questions are listed in Appendix 1. These covered different aspects of being home-schooled, but especially the social aspects.

We carried out the interviews in the homes of the children and their parents. We used a Dictaphone to record the interviews and these were later transcribed.

**Findings**

One of the first things we realised is that these three families’ experiences of home schooling were very different from each other, so we decided to analyse the interviews separately.

**Eleanor (12) and her mother Felicity**

When we asked Eleanor what it is like being home-schooled, she explained that she doesn’t find it weird that she is home-schooled but she has not got a comparison to make as she has never been to school in her life:

“My mum decided to home-school me because she was a teacher in the past and she has experienced the atmosphere and opinions of some school teachers on the pupils and has not liked it”.

Eleanor explained some of the reasons parents choose home-schooling:

“In general, a big reason is that some parents start home-schooling because their children are being bullied. Others start because their children aren’t as clever as the rest of the year and need time to catch up. Another reason is because the children just don’t like going to their schools or have learning difficulties like dyslexia and do not want to be hassled by others about it”.

Eleanor told us that she does whatever she wants most of the time. Her mum sometimes makes her do certain subjects that are useful to know. Some children who are home-educated choose exactly what they want to do and don’t have any restrictions. Some children like her have some restrictions but not as many as there would be at school.

Felicity (Eleanor’s mother) explained to us a bit more about the different approaches taken by home educators. Some home educators have a structured day which is very like “school at home”. Other home educators prefer their children to develop
independently and the children will ask questions whenever they need to. In between there are a whole range of home educators who do a mixture of these two styles.

When we asked Eleanor about some of the disadvantages of being home-schooled, she said:

“If there is an event going on including educated children the organisers will go down the list of schools and take children from schools to take part but they will not look for any home-schooled children. Also, home-schooled children have to pay a lot of money for extra lessons for ‘A’ levels and GCSE’s if their parents are not able to cover it themselves”.

But she also talked about advantages:

“You can still go on field trips but you get to go wherever and whenever you like during school time. I can choose what the trip is about or whether it’s just a fun - not so much educational - trip. I get the place to myself and don’t have to wait while others do things I don’t want to do so I have more time learning/having fun than hanging around waiting for other people.”

We were interested to learn how Eleanor had got to know her friends when she had never been to school. She didn’t see this as a problem:

“I have got two friends that I met at the library when I was really little… I have got loads of friends from dancing and a few from music and then I have got another friend because we were doing a show at Christmas.”

Felicity agreed:

“We’ve met a lot of different people that we wouldn’t have met in the normal run of things because people home-school for lots of different reasons…During the day the people she is mostly likely to socialise with are other home-educated children and then after school and at weekends she is more likely to socialise with her finds who are at school…we do tend to follow the school holiday pattern so she has access to her friends who are at school in term-time…I think she has a very good social life”.

Jamie (13), Laura (11), and parents Tina and Terry

Jamie came out of school soon after he started secondary school. It was a joint decision with his parents. He gave his view on the reasons:

“The school said I wouldn’t learn anything new until year 10 so that would be 18 months where I wouldn’t be learning anything new. We couldn’t understand the maths teacher either – he had this weird accent”.

When we asked Jamie about the advantages of being home-schooled he said:
“I’ve got access to a lot more information because I’ve got a computer downstairs with broadband so I can go on the net as long as I like. I’ve got access to the library in the city centre.

Jamie told us there was no structured plan for his work:

“I pick a subject one day and do some maths for the day, then have a break at lunch and then do some project work”.

His mother Tina gave her view:

“We don’t have any pattern. … If he gets up and wants to do maths that day, then he does maths. If he doesn’t want to do anything except cooking and bits and pieces he does that. He has a set task, he has to do so much worksheet for Maths, English and Science for the week. If he does it all on a Monday, then the rest of the week we can go out, do cooking, play golf. We just work it round that”.

When we asked Jamie how his education is different from the children at school, he had a very strong view:

“I am actually learning something, so that’s a big difference”.

Jamie’s father gave his view:

“The advantages are that John is far happier, we can see exactly what he is learning, how he’s learning and at what speed he’s going, so that we can control that and it’s easier for John because he’s not in a class of 30 other children where you can’t always get the attention from the tutor that you need. John has basically got 2:1 if he needs it…”

Asking about the social aspects, Jamie said he wasn’t seeing as many people as he would have done at school. But he did not see this as a big problem. In fact he feels he has more friends now, mainly amongst a group of other home-schooled children:

“I’ve got a load more friends now than when I was at school. There’s big group activities, like, a few weeks ago we went to Wicksteed Park and went bowling one day. There’s quite a big group of us in Milton Keynes”.

Jamie’s father agreed that he’s got more friends now than he ever had when he was at school. He also feels Jamie’s relationship with his mother has improved:

“John used to come home and he would have an attitude problem because he’s normally mixed with the wrong sort of kids. But he’s now more along the lines of a young adult and not an older child. He’s very easy to get on with, he’s very easy to talk to and I think it’s better now than it was before.”
We asked Jamie which have been the best and worst things about being home-schooled:

“Best things are that there are a lot more activities at home and one of the worst things is that I have to put up with my brother being here all the time”.

Talking to Jamie’s sister Laura gave us another view on home-schooling, because she was home-schooled for some time but then decided to go to school. We asked her what it feels like to go to school. Does she prefer it to home-schooling?

“No, I did prefer being at home, but that was because I wasn’t used to it (school). At the moment I would prefer being at home because I could get more work done and I haven’t got the teachers to tell me”.

Social aspects were an important reason for going to school:

“My mum had changed my (older) sister’s school and she came home and said it was really, really good and basically, I had friends who were at the same school so I decided to give it a try”.

Even so, Laura found she had lots of friends when home-schooled, including her brother:

“There was a lot more people my age that felt the same way about school as I did and me and my brother had done loads of joint work as well and that was a pretty good advantage… me and my brother were a good help to each other. He helped me and I think I helped him and that was one of the best things about being home-taught because we got to know each other a bit more.

But Laura said her relations with her brother changed when she started going to school again:

“It did because I didn’t really speak to my brother much – after I went back to school we used to fight more because I’d been with friends and then when I came home he used to annoy me because I hadn’t been at home”.

Tina and Terry seemed to give their children much more responsibility to decide which kind of school is best for them. We asked Tina if she found it upsetting or different when Laura decided to go to state school:

“I don’t like her being in school, I’d rather she was at home, she’s happier when she’s at home but she chose to go back to school and so I respect her decision, that’s her choice”.

Terry agreed:

“… they are old enough to make their own decisions. … As far as I’m concerned you have all got your own opinions. If you want to be home-educated and that’s what you want then I feel that that’s what you should be
given. If you want to go to school, you should be given the chance…and if it
doesn’t pan out you can always change later on. If she wants to go to school,
that’s fine, that’s her personal choice”.

Fiona (15) and her mother Jackie

Fiona went to school until she was 14, but her mother got worried that school wasn’t working for her:

“… we were faced with a choice of an increasingly unhappy and rebellious Fiona or actually taking her out (of school) and talking about what it was and why”.

Fiona told us how they decided:

“It was a combined effort. My mum took me out of the school and then we discussed whether I would rather stay at home … or go and find another school because I wasn’t going to go back to that school. In the end we decided it would be better if I did it (education) at home”.

At first, Fiona’s parents thought they would teach her but they found it difficult to organise. So they decided to buy GCSE courses from the National Extension College. Fiona explained:

“Basically I get units on topics, which take me about an hour on average, depending on the topic. I will spend an hour doing Biology and at the end of every unit I get an assignment which I send off with a form to my tutor, who can either phone me to tell me what they think about it, write to me, send me an e-mail – I never see them, but I’ve got them at the end of a phone …”

For Fiona, the most important thing about being home-schooled is the freedom it gives her to control her work:

“I prefer it to being at school because I can control my own work rather than sitting and having to listen for half hour about something I don’t necessarily need to listen to…I can control my own work rather than have someone else controlling what I’m doing – I can control my speed and how much I do a day – it’s much better…It means I can control days so if there is a certain day where I would normally be at school but something’s on I can choose not to work that day and choose to work a Sunday instead”

Fiona gave an example of her day:

“I get up about 9am, have something to eat and stuff like that, until about 9.30am and then I do an hour of work, I choose the subject or whatever I need to do, because I get set work to be done by the end of the week by mum and dad and discuss with them what is reasonable for me to be able to get done within a week and then I have a 10-15 minute break where I get something to
eat, get a drink, and then I do another hour and then I do two further hours for the rest of the day, and that is spread out however I want…After that I get ready and go up the city centre and meet all my friends”.

Fiona thought her social life had improved because she was home-schooled:

“…I can take days off on my friends’ birthdays and just not do any work that day and go and meet my friends and then do extra work on a Sunday or extra work on a Saturday or do extra hours on a different day. I can vary it to how I want to really.

Fiona felt that having the freedom to organise her day made it easier to organise her social life:

“Originally, I thought it would be a disadvantage not seeing my friends but I also found that I still see all my friends that I want to see from school just as much if not more because I see them more often because I can finish school whenever I want and I’ve made more friends who were not at my school…The people I hang around with has changed, but for the better I think, I prefer it like this rather than how it was before”.

Fiona told us more about her friends:

“…the time I came out of school I was going through a change of group of friends anyway…to people who …live across the whole of Milton Keynes and join as a group in Central Milton Keynes and that’s where I go everyday and weekend to meet them there. I was going through that change at the time I left school so it didn’t really matter that much because all these people who I’m friends with don’t go to school because they are a little bit older or they go to other schools in the area…”

From what Fiona told us it seemed the social aspects of home-schooling were very positive and this had affected her relationships in her family:

“I never really used to bring friends back here that much because the friends I used to hang around with never used to do that sort of thing at their friends’ house. The people I bring home now are the people who can get on with my family”

Fiona’s mother agreed:

“I think it has been a hugely positive experience and I think it has been hugely positive in the family …The single most common question we get asked is ‘But does she do the work? Because my little Johnny or my little Sarah wouldn’t’ and the answer is ‘yes, she does’.”
Conclusions

When we began work on this project we wanted to find out about the social aspects of being home-schooled. We know most of our friends from being at school and living in the same area as them. We thought home-schooled children might not have so many friends. But we found out that they use different ways of finding/gaining friends through things like clubs and group outings with other home-educated children. From what we were told, most of the children think that they have better friendships out of school than they used to have in school. They also have friends of a wider age range who they have met through home schooling and would not have made friends with otherwise. All of the parents we interviewed said that they feel their relationship with their son/daughter had improved since they have started home-educating their child/children. However we have only interviewed three families in our research so we can not be sure whether our findings are correct for all families and situations involving home education. The parents we talked with mostly seemed to see home-schooling as an approach that works for their child, in their situation. As Eleanor’s mother, Felicity put it:

“I think that home-schooling doesn’t suit everybody - but it does suit us”.

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Appendix: Interview questions

Parallel questions were asked of parents and children, as listed below, with specific follow-up questions as appropriate:

- What is it like being home-schooled?
- Why do you think that your parents have chosen to home school you, or was it your idea?
- Do you like being home-schooled and why?
- What are and have been the advantages of being home-schooled?
- What are and have been the disadvantages of being home-schooled?
- Can you choose which have been the best and worst things about being home schooled?
• How is your day organised?
• Is it different or alike to the state schooling days?
• How does you being home schooled effect your friendships with other people?

If other children are home-schooled in family:

• Does it get hard having younger / older brothers / sisters also being home-schooled?