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Exploring Home Education Children's Experiences of Learning

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Abstract

This study investigates home educated children's lived experiences of learning in order to contribute new knowledge to the growing body of research into home education as an educational practice. The nature of the research is a small-scale, exploratory study using visual-narrative inquiry to ensure a participatory method of data collection that was inclusive to children. Access to the hidden population of home educating families was aided by the researcher's dual positionality as a home educating parent and educational professional. Twelve children aged between five and twelve from six families participated in data collection over a three-week period through a photo-journal method followed by semi-structured interviews to elicit children's reflections on the photo-journal. Thematic analysis was deployed for the interpretation of the data.

Children expressed how they value their engagement in family activity, classes and clubs, through which they experience belonging and competency which contributes to their growing identity. Enjoyability and novelty made learning experiences memorable to children, whilst real-life rather than simulated activity ensured more commitment and motivation. Children associate learning with how far the activity develops their competency or contributes to their development towards an imagined future self. There is a strong connection between several themes found in existing research including learner autonomy and motivation (McDonald & Gray, 2019), incidental learning, real-life experiences (Thomas, 1998) and the benefits of personalisation for learning literacy and numeracy in home education (Pattison, 2014).

Keywords: home education, learning, visual narrative, children, Situated Learning

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Research Context

In the United Kingdom there is a well-established culture of home education supported by a diverse network of practitioners, organisations and developing research community (Fenton-Smith, 2017; Kunzman & Gaither, 2020). The political landscape is one of contention between the roles of the parent and the state with regards to children's education and who decides what constitutes a 'suitable and efficient education' (Education Act, 1996). As an educational practice, home education is growing with current figures likely to be over 150,000 children which is 1.5% of the school-age population (Department for Education, 2023). This growth has led to various enquiries from educational policy makers and other stakeholders to understand more about the type of education home educated children are receiving (Education Committee, 2021). The committee stressed there were gaps in knowledge and understanding of what children and young people thought about being home educated and whether their education was 'suitable' in being 'appropriate to their age and aptitude' (Long & Danechi, 2023). The Education Committee (2021) acknowledged a space in the current debate for children's voices, concluding that 'children's voices were lacking from research' calling for evidence that included children's views to aid the committee's review of home education.

Research Aims and Objectives

The overall research objective was to uncover home educated children's perspectives on how they learn in order to respond to the deficit of children's perspectives as noted by the 2021 Education Committee conclusions. Capturing children's authentic voices meant ensuring that children participate on their own terms and without having to conform to a preconceived view of learning set by the researcher.

A review of the current literature supported the Education Committee's conclusion that 'children's voices are lacking from research' (HoC, 2022, p.42) but there are a number of revealing studies focusing on parents and observers' perspectives. Three significant themes that emerge from existing literature on how home educated children learn are first, that it is a common experience for home educated children to have autonomy over the learning content and process with their parent taking on the role of facilitator rather than teacher. A second theme is the prevalence and centrality of socio-cultural learning in children's daily lives. A third significant theme was the temporal and transitional nature of practice as children grow and change. With this compelling knowledge base already available, it was important that an additional aim of this study was to compare the findings from the children's perspectives with those from parents and adult observers.

Methodology

Constructing a child-friendly methodology that takes account of power and communication issues inherent with researching children was important in the design. Narrative, in the form of photo-journal storytelling, has its roots in photoelicitation, a well-established, inclusive method that draws its authenticity from the historic place of storytelling in our culture and communication especially in children's cultures (Clark, 2011). The photoelicitation method also allows the child to participate fully, leading and directing the data collection in an inclusive medium where typical barriers to children's voice such as limited language acquisition and power imbalance (Alderson, 1995) is removed.

Photographs have the potential to offer the depth of description a child may not give verbally and so facilitate conversation. Photographs can be symbolic to the child, shedding light on a bigger story in the child's life that is difficult to articulate. The photoelicitation method facilitates the emergence of small stories (Bamberg, 2004) as each photograph tells a story about a learning experience. When the photographs are seen together, their wholeness will create a rich narrative of learning. Together, photographs can also reveal themes, for example a family's educational philosophy might be revealed, which in turn reflects a macro / larger societal narrative, social political issue, or event (Andrews, 2007; Caine et al, 2013).

Storying researcher positionality in narrative research

This research study falls into the category of insider research. The researcher acknowledges that their interest in this study is bound to their own history and experience through their temporal identity as a home educating parent and past experience as a secondary school teacher. They are reminded of what Clandinin et al. (2016) said about narrative researchers; in researching this subject, the researcher cannot extract themselves from the process so they must write themselves into the study.

Researcher's story:

Since January 2022 I have been engaged in insider research with a hidden population of which I am a member. I never imagined I would end up conducting research in the world of home education, but I am very grateful to the families who trusted me and participated in this visual-narrative study.

It was a typical Friday in the autumn of 2021, and we were walking in one of glorious Royal Parks close to where we live with twelve children and one dog. One of the mums, Elizabeth, asked me, 'How's your research going?' to which I answered that it was not going at all as I had struggled to recruit participants after the disruptions of Covid-19 and was considering changing my research focus completely. Elizabeth, always pensive, paused and said, 'you should research us.' She looked up towards the rowdy rush of children all talking at once on the path ahead of us, and added, 'I mean, if it's about learning, well that's what we are all about isn't it.' She motioned her head towards the children. We were home educators. All of our children were aged between five and twelve years old. We met regularly for them to play together whatever the weather, had a weekly Spanish class and regularly arranged educational trips. I looked at Elizabeth with a raised eyebrow; my recent training on participant consent echoing in my ears and glanced at the other mums who were listening. Helen joined in, 'yeah that would be amazing, I mean, they are learning all of the time, look at them now.' I acknowledged how fascinating it would be to study our children's learning as it was something we were always in dialogue about. I thanked them all for their enthusiasm and openness and said we could talk about again in the near future if they were still interested. And then I deliberately did not mention it again even though I thought about it often. I was determined to act within the bounds of researcher guidelines around consent and did not want to take advantage of my insider status by blurring the lines. If this was going to happen, it would have to come from them.

The researcher 'lives alongside' (Clandinin, 2016) participants as their friends' mum and their mum's friend in the outer circle of their lives, attending birthday parties, engaging in small talk at the local park, attending trips to museums and country parks alongside them. Clandinin et al. (2016) explain that narrative inquirers gain understanding of others' lives by remaining inside instead of outside of stories; by 'attending to each person's knowledge in relational and participatory ways' (Clandinin et al. 2016: p.20). Narrative Inquiry's acknowledgement of the researcher's relational presence makes it an appropriate and enriching method for this study the researcher is conducting as an insider in the home education community.

At first, I imagined an observational study into learning through play; that was something we as mum's always marvelled about as we watched the different age children playing with one another, but I worried about how it would be difficult to achieve authentic consent from the children for such a study. Around the same time, I came across the Strengthening Home Education Report (2021) which had been published that summer. The government had commissioned a committee to review home education and as I read through the findings, it occurred to me what sort of research study our Friday group might be just right for. The report concluded that children's voices were lacking from research.

One Friday in November, when the topic of conversation turned to the Strengthening Home Education Report, I suggested that if we were going to engage in a research study then finding

out what our children's own lived experience of learning was would be valuable. The other mums agreed, and I took the idea to my supervisor.

Research Design

The nature of the study is a small-scale and exploratory using visual-narrative inquiry to ensure a participatory method of data collection that was inclusive to children. Data collection was undertaken over a three-week period through a participatory photo-journal method followed by a semi-structured interview to elicit children's reflections on the photo-journal. A semi-structured interview was also used to ask the parent questions that provided context to the child's narrative. The researcher created narrative prose that centred around the photographs using the transcripts from interviews. A final version was signed off by families once they were satisfied that the narratives represented their experience.

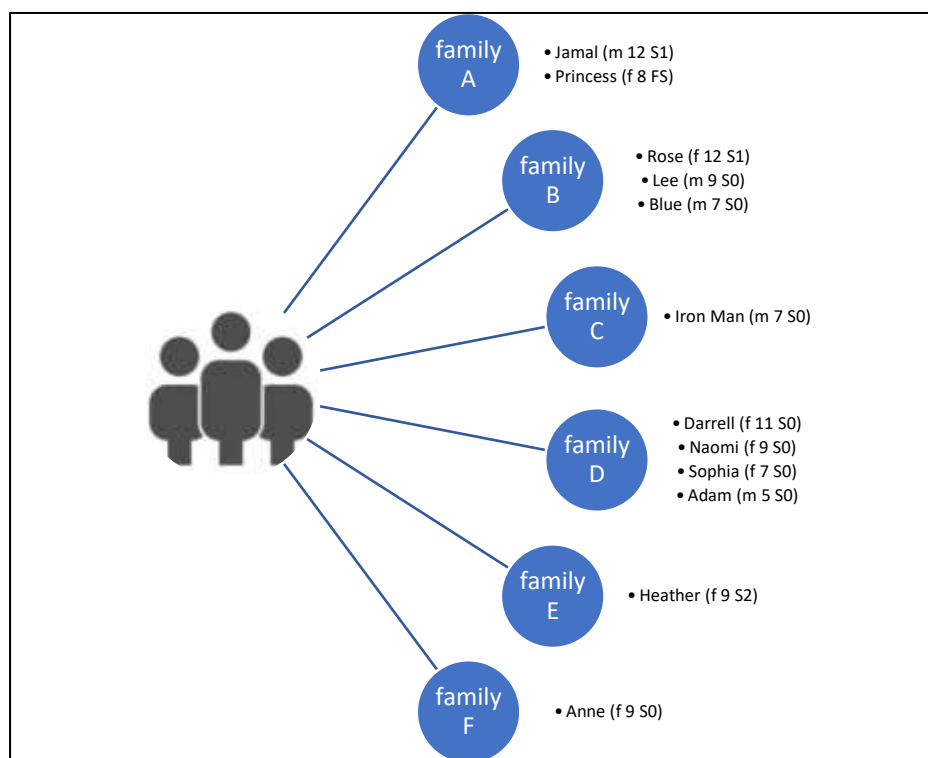


Figure 1: demographic of participants by pseudonym, gender and age and how many years of schooling they had experienced in the past is shown by S followed by number of years. FS = currently flexischooling)

Findings: Visual Analysis

The following chart shows the results of a survey of the children's descriptions of the images they included in their photo-journal. To preserve the child's language in the survey process, I refrained from interpreting the photographs directly and instead referred to the children's own descriptions in the textual data. I created categories that fitted the children's descriptions.

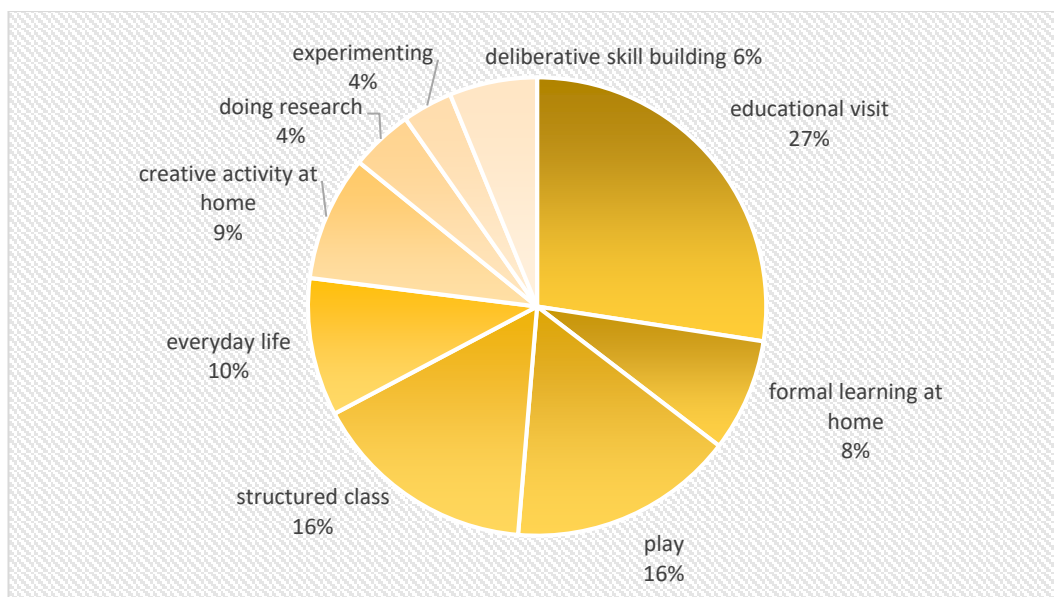


Figure. 2: types of learning incident photographed by children

Children captured incidental learning[†] through everyday life experiences as well as documenting their deliberate learning of skills in a variety of contexts. Attending visits, classes and completing formal learning at home made up 51% of the photographs. This percent illuminates that the children engaged in a typical curriculum based on normative understandings of children's learning for a significant proportion of their time. The survey also reveals the children have a broad concept of learning as 26% of photographs were of play and everyday life. The remaining 23% of photographs were of self-directed exploratory activities such as making, researching and experimenting.



Figure. 3: 'not all learning is positive'. Lee, aged 9, includes this photograph of injuring his foot whilst playing

[†] incidental learning is unplanned or unintentional learning

The finding that children had a broad concept of learning is supported by previous research highlighted in the literature review. Children understood learning to be something embedded in daily life rather than a separate endeavour. In response to the research question, the survey of the photographs revealed that the children experienced learning in a variety of contexts; planned activities arranged by parents such as educational visits and structured classes were common and incidental learning through everyday life was recognised by the children as a legitimate and authentic way to learn.

Thematic Analysis of Narratives

Reflexive thematic analysis of the stories behind the photographs and many other connected stories produced themes. The table below shows eight themes generated from a mix of pattern, emotion and focused coding methods (Maurya, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

A. developing competency



'learning to be grown up'
Princess, age 8

B. fun and enjoyable activities



I have liked aeroplanes since I was little and visited other times (...) I know facts about them and have three toys of them'
Adam, age 5.

C. real life experiences



'This was a great learning experience for me because it's difficult keeping an animal alive. How do mothers do it?'
Rose, age 12.

D. shared learning experiences



'I learned a lot of things about helping Rose when she got stuck in the river and going back for Rose when she was freezing cold'
Lee, age 9

E. novel and out of the ordinary experiences



'I love how I learned to make something I didn't even know existed'
Anne, age 9

F. family and heritage skills



'That's my Nana. She's the one who bakes the cakes with me! (...) Because Mama and Nana used to be a cake baker for her job and my mum used to work here at Nana's house to bake the cakes'
Iron Man, age 9

G. self-directed learning



'I had this idea because the wooden thing was round so it reminded me of the earth.'
Heather, age 9

H. describing processes and explaining new knowledge



'you can see all my tools here actually; they are ones I use to cut the plasticine up to make the right shape'
Iron Man, age 7

Figure. 4: themes derived from textual data illustrated with an example photograph from the children's photo-journals.

The analysis reveals that the learning incidents children took photographs of were experiences of emotional value, featuring competency development, fun, togetherness and authenticity. An illuminating characteristic of all twelve narratives was how children chose to structure their learning stories by describing to the interviewer the process they uncovered or by divulging the new knowledge they had gained. In fact, divulging new knowledge and understanding and the theme of competency were always present together.

Children expressed how they value their engagement in classes and clubs, through which they experience belonging and competency which contributed to their growing identity. Enjoyability and novelty made learning experiences memorable to children, whilst real-life rather than simulated activity ensured more commitment and motivation. Children also associated learning with how far the activity developed their competency or contributed to their development towards an imagined future self.

Within the findings there is a strong connection between several themes found in the literature review including learner autonomy and motivation, incidental learning and real-life experiences and the benefits of personalisation for learning literacy and numeracy in home education. Accounts of incidental learning of literacy and numeracy connect with the work of Pattison's (2014) work on reading as a cultural practice and evidence of self-directed autonomous learning echoes the findings of McDonald & Gray's (2019) study into unschooling.

Theoretical Reflections

There are clear theoretical connections between the themes of competency development and identity and belonging. Lave and Wenger (1991) used the concept of legitimate peripheral participation as an analytical viewpoint in order to understand learning as a dimension of social practice. This perspective sees the experience of participation as the critical action in the phenomenon of learning. Belonging to a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) as a novice and then, with growing competence, emerging as a master, humans experience their identity socially and temporally. The following extract from Princess exemplifies the connection between competency, identity and participation within a childhood learning context.

I think it's really fun posting stuff for mum's work. I like doing it on my own without my mum coming in. I say to her, 'stay here, I am doing it'. I feel like it's fun to do it on my own and also, I don't get embarrassed by her; she embarrasses me everywhere.

So I go through the aisles, go to the postman and give it to him. I just put them over the thing and then he does his work and then I collect the receipt which is normally this thick (gestures the thickness of the paper), the receipt, cos mum just makes so much parcels. So, I put this photo in the journal because I am learning. Learning how to act grown up, how to post stuff, how to have my full hands and open a door (laughs).

Princess, age 8

Princess enjoys helping in the family business. She likes the independence it gives her and opportunity to practice acting grown up. The learning activity is an authentic as opposed to simulated one, so it has purpose and meaning. Lave (2011) acknowledged the process of 'upbringing' of children by parents involves the same process of apprenticeship whereby the newcomer (the child) becomes a member of the community of practice through legitimate peripheral participation. Princess is able to contribute and feel belonging and purpose in her learning.

Throughout the narratives there are other examples of the significance of learning in-family skills for children's growing sense of identity and competence which provide compelling evidence for the relevance of Lave and Wenger's Situated Learning Theory (1991) to home education. In addition, there are other valuable connections between child-led learning, motivation and self-determination theory (Ryan, Deci & Richard, 1985) that are outside of the scope of this report.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the gathering of evidence of how home educated children perceive of their learning experience by producing novel insights into common practices that children recognise as positive in supporting their learning. Analysis around these common practices in relation to theories of informal learning such as Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) contribute to the growing multi-disciplinary field of child-led learning. The foremost position of the child's perspective in this study provides rich and detailed visual-narrative data previously unavailable in the field of study. The child-centred method of data collection and accessible output of the visual-narrative form is easily transposed from academic contexts to stakeholders in policy and practice contexts. The potential value of this work lies in its replicability which would yield a much larger dataset for researchers of home education to utilise. The gaps in knowledge and understanding about how home educated children learn that was acknowledged by the Education Committee (2022) can only be filled when more children from this hidden but growing population come forward and tell their stories.

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