

'Hanging on the Edge off a Cliff' Home Educating Parents' Experience of Exam Cancellations due to Covid Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

National examinations were cancelled for students in England at the end of the summer term in 2020 2021 and were replaced by teacher-assessed grades due to the Covid pandemic. This paper aims to present the experience of home educating parents as they navigated the process required to enable their child to access grades during this crisis. Home educated students can only have access to exams as private candidates. The exam cancellations resulted in restricted access to teacher assessments for this population due to the nature of their educational settings. This study employed semi-structured interviews with home educating parents in England to focus on their experience of the exam cancellations and their access to alternative grading processes for their children. The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The most significant finding is the lack of regulations for exams and assessments, which has the potential to limit a population of children to obtain the grades they need to progress further educationally. The other significant finding that emerged is the impact of the exam cancellation on the family, including the emotional, time and financial costs. In conclusion, questions are raised about the importance of just and equitable access to qualifications for home educated students.

keywords: Covid-19, exams; exam cancellation, home education, homeschooling, IPA

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the experience of the national exam cancellations in summer 2020 and 2021 in England from a home educating parent's perspective. Although all national examinations during the summer of 2020 and 2021 were cancelled for students aged 16-18, home educated students are a cohort of students independent of those in the schooling system. This paper will explain how home educating students gain qualifications, their motives and approaches to obtaining these as private candidates. Therefore this study sheds light on a specific cohort of students outside the mainstream education system. It is hoped that this will support contingency planning, ensuring private candidates' inclusion in future policy consideration.

Before explaining the context of exams taken by home educating students, it is necessary to establish the territory of home education by giving a brief review of the relevant academic literature. Therefore, the first section will explain briefly home education in England within the education system before giving context on the exam cancellations due to the pandemic. Then, the research methodology is introduced, followed by the findings, discussion and conclusion.

1.1. The Right to Home Educate

"parents have the prior right to decide what kind of education their children shall receive" (United Nations, 1948 article 26.3).

The right to home educate can be perceived to have originated from the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights (Donnelly, 2016; Reimer, 2010; United Nations, 1948). In England, this is implemented in Section 7 of the Education Act 1996 (previously section 36 in Education Act 1944), where home education is recognised as 'education received otherwise than regular attendance at school.'

"The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable— (a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and (b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise." The Education Act (1996)

The act incorporates three significantly concepts; education, efficiency and full-time. The lack of clarity on these concepts allows for broad interpretations depending on perspectives. The terms 'suitable' and 'efficient' home education have been debated in courts since 1911 by Lord Alverstone in *Bevan v Shears* (Simon Webb, 2009). The Department of Education acknowledges this ambiguity in its Elective Education guidance for parents:

"There is no definition of this in statute law. However, it can be interpreted as meaning education which 'achieves what it is intended to achieve'" (Department of Education, 2019, p. 7 section 2.7).

As such, by law, parents in England are fully responsible for ensuring their children receive a full-time education as described and discussed above. They may request a school-place in a mainstream school that the local authority is obliged to provide or choose any private educational setting. Another approach to compulsory education is home education, also known as Homeschooling, Education Otherwise or Elective Education. Home schooling is more widely used in the American context. It is also associated with replicating school at home, as parents were required to do during the Covid-19 lockdowns. In this study, the term home education is employed, as it relates to those who choose to home educate (regardless if they replicate school at home by choice), excluding parents schooling at home due to the pandemic.

Currently, there are no legal requirements for home educators to follow the National Curriculum or have any set hours of education (Children's Services Select Committee, 2005; Simon Webb, 2009). Home education allows the parent to choose the topics, content, time, location, and methods (Davies, 2015; Kendall & Taylor, 2016; Rothermel, 2003). The variances in interpretations and implementation have led to implications when researching home education, as the context, motives and methods vary immensely from one home educating family to another.

Although accurate data is not available, it is expected that at least 80.000 children are home educated in England (Ari Neuman & Guterman, 2018; Shipman, 2019). It has been argued that the recent increase in home education is due to a growing parenting culture of 'intensive childrearing' or 'attachment parenting style' (Aurini & Davies, 2005 ; Fortune-Wood, 2000). Another perspective on the increase is the marketisation of education (Aurini & Davies, 2005 ; Lubienski, 2003; Meighan, 1995; Ray, 2004) and neoliberal values. Compared to private education, they view home education as a choice in the current education market. The number of home educated children is expected to increase further due to the pandemic. Some local authorities have seen an increase of over 200% in the last term of 2020 (Whittaker, 2020).

It is challenging to summarise parental motives for home educating their children. Home educators cannot be generalised into one collective category as, naturally, parents are ultimately unique individuals with diverse beliefs and values. It is essential to note that home Educators cannot be considered a homogeneous group due to the diverse motives, backgrounds, pedagogical approaches, and philosophical educational stands (Jones, 2013) and the complex spectrum of families' characteristics (Amber Fensham-Smith, 2019; Morton, 2010). It is, however, the most investigated area within home education research. There have been numerous studies that highlight the parental philosophical motives for opting to home educate (Aurini & Davies, 2005 ; Lubienski, 2003; Morse & Mee Bell, 2018; Morton, 2010; Mullarney, 1983; Ari Neuman & Guterman, 2016; Rothermel, 2011; Stevens, 2001; The Economist, 2005 ; Thomas & Pattison, 2013). The research indicates that the motives for home education may vary immensely from one family to another, or even one child to another (Ari Neuman & Guterman, 2016). Parents withdraw their children due to a deficit in the education available for their children in schools (Davies, 2015; Rothermel, 2011; Simon Webb, 2009) in addition to the desire to give a better opportunity or to do better than the school setting provides (Pattison, 2015). Whilst home education is on the increase, parental motives are surging as well.

1.2. Context on Exam Cancellation

In England, a young person has to stay in full-time education until the age of 18, unless they are on an apprenticeship or combining their education with volunteering or a form of training (Gov.uk).

The value of standardised exams in England is focussed on measuring student attainment but school performance (Rosenthal, 2003). Therefore, there is a debate about the actual value of exams in the current climate. The argument for or against standardised assessments is emphasised by the barriers within the education system, including for children with various learning needs (Wood & Happé, 2020), as GCSE exam performance improves by less than 1% in specialist schools (Machin, McNally, & Wyness, 2013).

The debate around the value of exams arises from governments centralised education system, marketisation and the increase of 'audit culture' (Roome & Soan, 2019). Extensive research exists on the National Qualification Framework's (NQF) value, its influence on access to occupations and the creation of closer links between the labour market and education (Little, 2000). A large and growing body of literature has emphasised that NQF is politically motivated and closely linked to the neo-liberal public sector reforms (Allais, 2010; Young, 2003), producing incentives for learners and accountability for institutions. The caveat around the importance of exams extends beyond students within the schooling system, within the home education population. Due to the various learning approaches, obtaining qualifications may not always be an option. Some authors suggest that standardised exams may not be a fair assessment for home educated students as a result of the distinctively different approaches to learning in school settings (Govaerts, 2020; Pattison, 2015; Ray, 2004). Despite the importance of qualifications, there remains a paucity of evidence on how home educators relate to national qualifications and to what extent their home education impacts their future livelihoods in England. The author recognises that not all home educating parents believe national exams are essential. As was pointed out in the introduction, this paper focuses on a population of home educating parents who feel it is essential their children follow this route of national qualifications.

During the summer of 2020, the government announced that all exams would be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic and replaced by centre assessed graded. However, such as-

assessments are not available for private candidates, like home educated students. Typically, home educated students study independently or with a private tutor, therefore not affiliated with schools or colleges. The announcement and guidance did not take home educated children into account. Home educated students did not have mock exams that teachers graded; they did not have official predicted grades. They often worked independently, resulting in not having the evidence required by the exam centres (A Fensham-Smith & Merrett, 2020).

As explained in the section above, due to the nature of home education in England, accurate data on home education is scarce. Ofqual indicated that approximately 20000 private candidates were due to sit exams privately in summer 2020. However, no breakdown of this has been published. However, out of the roughly 8000 private A-level candidates, only 3,300 received an A-level grade (J Belgutay, 2020; Pedley, 2021). Data on other general examinations, such as GCSEs and BTEC, was not available at the time of writing this study. Ofqual claims they have offered alternative options such as resitting the exams in the autumn series instead (Gayle, 2020) whilst prioritising “students who need a grade this summer for immediate progressions” (Dickens, 2020). The consequences of this have not been explored as it seems to be reported that private candidates were disproportionately disadvantaged (J Belgutay, 2020) and “were left in limbo” (BBC, 2020; J Belgutay, 2020). Although Ofqual conducted a consultation into the exceptional arrangements in 2020 (Ofqual, 2020a), the difficulties in gaining grades were not resolved in summer 2021. This study investigates the impact of exam cancellations on home educated students and their families from an adult’s perspective. The experiences of home educated students is an under-researched area in academic literature. Exploring parents’ perceptions may illuminate how this population has been affected by policy decisions around exam access during the Covid period. This may help policymakers understand the implications of exam cancellations and the options for accessing future qualifications.

There are four main exam boards in England: AQA, Pearson Edexcel, Oxford Cambridge and RSA Exams (OCR) and the Welsh Joint Examinations Committee (WJEC), regulated by Ofqual. Each exam board offers a range of subjects for key stages 4 and 5, from which schools decide what they will offer to their students (Ofqual, 2020b).

The government guidance regarding the exam cancellations in March 2020 addressed schools, colleges and students attending these (Department of Education, 2020). Instead of sitting exams, the announcement was made that students would receive a calculated grade with the help of an algorithm developed by Ofqual. This was then scrapped in August 2020 due to significant concerns and controversy of inaccuracies in the calculation (Ferguson & Savage, 2020). In the summer of 2021, exams were cancelled once more and replaced with centre assessed grades. Teachers submitted an estimated grade for each student with coursework and mock exams evidence. Schools and colleges submitted these grades to the exam boards to be reviewed.

Interestingly, IGCSE examinations, usually taken in private schools, were not cancelled. Instead, the Education Secretary decided not to cancel IGSE examinations and would leave the decision to the school in question. This caused additional confusion as different exam boards took their own decisions and criteria to go ahead or not, creating yet another inconsistency (Coughlan, 2021).

On the other hand, home educators enter exams as private candidates, having prepared for the exam independently, with a parent, family member, or tutor. Parents register the young person as an external candidate at an independent exam centre or an educational setting that allows private candidates. There is no requirement for schools or colleges to have places available for young people within its community to sit exams externally. Therefore, there will be

areas with no exam centres and no schools where home educated children can take exams, forcing parents to travel long distances for the child to take exams. Therefore, the choice to home educate comes with the responsibility to arrange and manage communications with exam centres and requires the parents to navigate through the process of submitting grades reflecting the child's ability. This involved verifying the requirements from the various exam boards, exam centres and tutors. Initially, there was no guidance published by Ofqual or the department of education that explained the private candidates' process. Ofqual published its guidance on April 3rd 2020, with an update to include private candidates on May 22nd 2020. The deadline to submit the grades was June 12th 2020 (Ofqual, 2020c). This study aimed to explore the home educating parents' experience during this period. However, due to several delays and the circumstances during the pandemic, by the time the research team commenced data collection, exams at the end of the summer term 2021 were also cancelled. The timeframe of the events related to this study was extended from summer 2020 to summer 2021.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This study adopted an inductive approach where each home educated family is taken as a single case that has been affected by the exam cancellations. A qualitative and interpretive approach was taken to explore the lived experience of the home educating families from the parent's perspective to better understand the impact of exam cancellations on this group. Three researchers from three different specialisms in education conducted the data collection. The makeup of the research team is a home educator/researcher (the author), a SEND researcher and practitioner and a former teacher with safeguarding expertise. This enabled the team to mitigate the risk of positive and negative biases while respecting and valuing the home education culture. Two researchers peer-reviewed each other's interpretations of the data by reviewing the established themes from interviews and organising and reorganising these in colour codes.

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with a general interview schedule to guide the interviewer, with flexibility for adjustments according to the participants' responses. This allows participants to provide their accounts around a common issue (Fontana & Frey, 2003). The interviews lasted up to one hour. The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Spiers & Smith, 2019). This is reflected in the way this paper's findings are presented.

2.2. Sample

Through convenience sampling, home educated parents who have dependents who were entered for (inter)National exams (e.g. IGCSE, GCSE, A-levels) as private candidates in summer sitting 2020 / 2021 were recruited. Parents whose children are educated in the schooling system were not included in this study. Convenience sampling was used due to the limited time available for this project and the difficulty in reaching home educated families willing to share information about their home education. The home education community is a very close and supportive network. To gain access has proven to be challenging, even with a gatekeeper. A widely used social media platform for home educating parents is Facebook. Despite the author having access to these groups, as a home educator, recruitment did not commence prior to having permission from the group admins. Therefore, the author approached 12 home educating groups admins in June 2021, with a brief introduction and summary of the

research and a flyer. Five admins responded and approved, one more admin approved after reassuring that all participants would remain anonymous.

A flyer was distributed in the closed national Facebook groups with brief information with a link to a website with further information about the study and contact details of researchers. The comments option was removed to remove the potential risk of identifying participants who may have shown interest by commenting. The flyer had an interactive link which took them to the research website: <https://homeedexamcancellations.com>. Interested potential participants could read all information and express an interest by filling in a form on that website. The researchers replied by email within 48 hours to arrange a telephone conversation about the research and address any questions or concerns they may have had. This was followed up with a link to a secure online consent form. Once consent had been received, participants were contacted to arrange a convenient time and date for the interview. The interviews took place either over the phone or on Microsoft Teams. Nine home educating parents filled in the consent forms, resulting in nine interviews. One interview was excluded as mid-through the interview it appeared that the participant misunderstood the criteria, and it became clear that, although the parent was a home educating parent, the child in question taking the exams was not home educated but was in a school setting. Although undoubtedly the pandemic and the exam period were stressful for everyone, challenges related to home educating parents who needed to arrange alternatives to the exams were not represented in this interview. One participant was interrupted, and therefore the relevant case was split into two interviews. In total, eight participants qualified to be included in the data.

2.3. Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Bath Social Science Research Ethics committee. Special consideration was taken for the nature of online recruitment and how participants would remain anonymous. Moreover, the research team are familiar with and adhered to the BERA ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018).

2.4. Data Collection

After the interviews were conducted, the interviews were transcribed and anonymised. All identifiable information was removed, such as names of people and exam centres. Interviews lasted between 45 and 58 minutes. One interview was interrupted after 35 minutes and continued on a later occasion for another 40 minutes. The interviews took place online or over the phone between June 2021 and September 2021. The timeframe may have affected the number of participants for various reasons. Although we were amid a pandemic, it was the summer holidays, in which people may be less available. Also, during this period, there were growing concerns amongst home educators concerning a court case in Plymouth LEA against a group of home educators. In addition to this, a consultation involved a proposed compulsory home education register, causing controversy and anxiety amongst home educators (A Fensham-Smith & Merrett, 2020; Merrett, 2020). These events happening simultaneously were sensed on social media as a period of uncertainty awaiting the outcomes of these events. Moreover, the recruitment was when parents waited for the assessed grades and planned for the next academic year. Therefore, the author believes this may have impacted the research data collection, which will be addressed in the ‘limitations’ section.

2.5. Data Analysis

Exploring the experiences of home educating parents puts the voice and lived experience at the heart of this research. Interpreting the data involved reflexive research practice and being aware of researcher positionality. As an insider, a home educator whose child was affected by the exam cancellations, the researcher could relate to the experiences and engage with the participant in the data collection process and the interpretation of the data. However, in the data analysis phase, the researcher made an extra effort to stay close to the data and focus on the participant's voice rather than relating it to their own experience. As a triangulation method, having peers review and audit the subordinate themes was instrumental in strengthening and validating the process and the findings.

The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Spiers & Smith, 2019) as the interviews were an opportunity for the parents to share their lived experience of the period when exams were cancelled due to the pandemic. The aim was to explore this through their emotional states and how they were impacted. The researcher believes that was best achieved through a hermeneutic approach to the participants making meaning of their experience and seeing the world as they see it (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

3. Findings

Before introducing the themes that emerged, it is essential to share the participants' insights into their backgrounds.

As explained above, home educating parents are fully responsible for their child's education. The parental role and what this responsibility entails were apparent in the data.

*You have the responsibility for your children's education all on you really
(Flora)*

They all had a powerful sense of responsibility felt they were held accountable for their child's performance. The parent managed the content of learning, outsourcing, and liaising social aspects of home education. This indicated the extent to which home educating parents invested in their child's education with time, financially, emotionally, and mentally.

I think it's more important to look at your child, see what they need, and as much as you can move the system around them. Uh, because they're young and to traumatise them is not great (Sandra)

*Umm because at this point [at around 11 years], you are still very nervous at whether you are tampering with their future and doing the right thing
(Nigella)*

As explained above, when it was announced that exams were cancelled, there was a lack of information in relation to private candidates, causing major concern and uncertainty amongst the parents.

I think ..., it-it kind of felt like your just kind of, hanging on the edge of a cliff or something you know, never knew what going to happen next and, ... a feeling [of being] invisible kind of thing, umm So it was just a mess really (Sam)

The 2020 exams were off. School was off, it was all... all very much up in the air, as... as to what would happen and there was this long period where sort of every week there was a little... another bit of information and you

didn't quite know whether you might actually be able to do it in the summer... I guess overall there about five months when we just didn't really know what the plan was, didn't have enough information to properly decide what were going to do (Flora)

Having established the context of the home educating parents' situation, the next section will present the data analysis' findings.

Two overarching master themes emerged, with each master theme incorporating subordinate themes. Each master theme is explained below, with the main subordinate themes that evolved and established it.

3.1. Master Theme A: The Costs of the Exam Cancellation on the Students and the Family

The first master theme and the most powerful one elicited the various costs that the home educating student and family had endured due to the exam cancellations. Home educating parents explained their approach in preparing for exams, which indicated the uniqueness in their home education approach. Their home education approach adapts to the child's interests, needs and abilities. This is also reflected in how they prepare for exams, at what age they start preparing and taking the exam, and their exam choice. It even affects which exam boards they opt for. Parents explained that they staggered the exams over several years, often taking GCSEs as early as 13 to practice for more important exams later.

We were never planning on doing all his GCSEs together we were planning to stage it so some GCSEs last year [2020] and some this year [2021] (Marcia)

So we have less pressure in a way because its almost like if she doesn't even pass we do feel she will but if she didn't its not the end of the world is it we just said this is a practice

They are loving it so its following their interests as well ... she is just doing enjoying herself at the moment finding out what she is interested in... she has come away from (GCSE) Travel and Tourism with: no I don't really want to do that but classics has been different aww I might do this at university you know like she is finding what she really enjoys (Wendy)

The participants mentioned the extent of parents' time navigating the exam process as private candidates. They shared the sources of information and how they processed this information and mentioned how the guidance and announcements made by the Department of Education often were unclear as they were aimed at schools only. Social media became a source of information where parents shared their interpretation of the guidelines and their experience obtaining grades for their children, resulting in even more time needed for processing and taking decisions. The lack of consistency, even for schools, and lack of time to prepare for these changes affected their access to the alternatives for exams.

I don't want to waste any more time on GCSEs because we approached so many exam centres and they were worse [that the school they originally booked with]..... so it has all been so much time consuming and I, its just not worth it will be more time with ... we are not certain if we can get a GCSE or not so we have decided not to do any GCSEs at all (Marcia)

This increased the workload and pressure on parents as they tried to manage the situation and make the right decisions on their children's behalf.

I think yeah, that was another aspect of it yes, but I think that's what I mean by overwhelming. It was just feeling, as I said, that it was just out of control and... you were the one that had to, you know, at the end of the day you were the one that was going to get blamed if it all went horribly wrong. (Fiona)

The other cost that emerged was financial. There was a distinct indicator that families are fully aware and accepting that they carry all financial burdens, including exams. As they opted out of the mainstream system, all parents are very aware of the financial costs. However, what was not expected were the extra costs be associated with gaining grades due to the pandemic. Not all home educating parents could afford to pay tutors and exam centres the extra fees associated with the centre assessments that replaced the exams.

I think, well, financially, we're in a position where we're fortunate but we could have... you know we could have found the money, but it's... you know it's... you never want to be paying..., you know, like this year it would have been an extra £500 on top of the £500 already for three exams (Flora)

..in total was just like £160 for the 3, and then that became uu-uuhh you know- uh close to £200 for each exams... plus for the tutors for each of these, and it was just... astronomical really (Sam)

Other parents decided they could not afford to obtain grades for their children.

We planned to do it and then umm we could have changed to another exam board and of course work would have been taken into account but that would have cost me an extra three/four hundred pounds and we just couldn't afford it so it came down to money at the end of the day (Wendy)

This illustrated a real impasse for parents. Consequently, the parental liability resulted in the child not being able to gain the qualification like their peers. It came down to a family's financial situation, regardless of their effort to be exam ready if the student would submit the evidence required to obtain a grade. The period of not knowing and arranging with the various exam boards and exam centres gave parents a sense of lack of control.

I did feel quite trapped really at one point because it was the not knowing that was so difficult because you normally... you can deal with everything you sort of, you know, have a look around, see what the possibilities are, and then make your decision. But it was the not knowing and even decisions being made and then changed from some of the centres and the boards (Fiona)

This impacted the parents' mental wellbeing, which was strongly reflected in the data.

Last year I was just getting ill from it. You know, I I'm not kidding. I kept thinking I'm not gonna. I'm gonna get stomach ulcer or something and I was just. It's funny. It's it's the constant uncertainty with the stress that causes you. I think I think been worse for us parents and that it has been for the kids, but I think. (Gloria)

And I will admit that it was a day of crying when that [TA assessed grades with no alternative for HE children] came out (Flora)

As parents attempted to navigate the system, the period of uncertainty and the possibility of delaying exams and changing their educational plan also significantly affected the home educated young person. Some parents attempted to shield the young person from the stress and frustration that the parent was experiencing.

It was me dealing with it and that took weeks because you know but I did not share that frustration with my son I didn't I did not involve him umm because it wasn't necessary ... if he went to school he would be obviously have numerous teachers and have this managed for him (Marcia)

The exam cancellations combined with the lockdown significantly impacted other young people.

The eldest one has had a complete umm dysregulated year in terms of mental health and without too fine a detail they have ended up in hospital five times over the year three of which were incredibly serious ... the effect of the, you know the lockdown played a large part (Nigella)

He's now spending being stressed. It's missing ... little glimpses of it coming back. ... I kind of feel like I'm pushing him up a hill to back where he used to be (Sandra)

Some parents also expressed that the increase of stress and their mental wellbeing also affected relationships within the family unit.

But I was so stressed, but so stressed that, ..., my husband was getting so annoyed. (Gloria)

So kind of the the rest of the husband and the children were neglected, and really my youngest was neglected the most because my middle child was old enough to be set some work and could at least be getting on with things, whereas my youngest really needed my my time and my attention in order to teach her she needs me to sit down and do something that's off some level of quality, not just open a textbook and say right let's work our way through. Uhm, so she was very disturbed. She started sleeping in our bed at night, maybe because she felt so kind of left on her own during the day. Uhm, and of course 'cause it was luck sounds she therefore just spent a lot of time playing in her bedroom. Uhm, which you know? Which wasn't, which wasn't ideal. She, she did tell me she was not pleased about it. (Sandra)

The parents' experiences navigating the process to obtain grades in the summer of 2020 and 2021 clearly indicated to have had a negative impact on the parents and the family unit. The parents had to bear all the financial, mental, and time costs. The parents were very well aware of it but had no control over the situation. The sense of lack of control made parents reflect on the position of home education in the broader education system, which evolved into the second master theme.

3.2. Master Theme B The Desire for Recognising Home Education as a Division Within the State's Education System

This master theme illustrates the parents' view that their home educating young people should be entitled to equitable access to nationally recognised qualifications like their peers. Parents related often to the mainstream education system and drew comparisons with home education. As a legal form of educational provision, they sought equal rights and drew attention to elements of inequality or disadvantage. The exam cancellations exaggerated this.

I am a little disappointed because I know he could have achieved you know more but and I think it is a little bit annoying knowing that I knew that the exams could have happened it was but when exams were cancelled and everything you know and umm he wasn't it made it so difficult for home educators and children (Marcia)

Parents drew a comparison between teacher-assessed grades in school and within the home educated cohort. Home educating parents saw the variations between exam boards as an inconsistency that may affect their home educated young person.

When will it be fair? All these children are all going to be disadvantaged because they've literally at the end of their school life in a pandemic. That that's just part of life, you know. I mean, how many years can the universities look favourably on it and stuff like that? At some point you have to, so I think it's hard as well because of my home ed kid. I mean, you know we were classic home edders. You know you're starting September, you sit the exam in May. You don't need three years, two years for GCSEs. (Gloria)

There were concerns that the inconsistencies between exam boards and exam sittings would impact the children further as a cohort who could be stigmatised for not taking exams.

I just don't think it is going to be a fair comparison across the board and umm you know like some of them were able to submit homework which yeah parents could have helped them with it but then again teachers help them in schools don't they to bring up levels and it was this whole notion that we are not to be trusted even the Cambridge private candidates have to be invigilated others don't and others can send course work in but course work isn't highly invigilated. (Wendy)

I think also that this year has and the year before has provided a lot of unrepresentative exam grades, both inflated and also deflated, both of which I think are going to have negative impacts later on and they detract from what the exact external exams at all about the external exams are an opportunity for all children to be tested fairly under the same conditions for the same length of time. On the same day. And, and in a way, none of none of the none of the grades that we've been given under these circumstances represent that in any way. (Sandra)

Although parents realised it was also difficult for school children, they viewed that their home educated children were further disadvantaged. There was a sense that their children were treated differently, which caused them to be vulnerable to the system; some suggested they were open to being financially exploited by some tutors and/or exam centres during a crisis.

And for those saying that that was unfair on schoolchildren, the school children were being assessed by teachers who really did know them. And if the teachers and the schools did things properly, they should have been able to predict that a student was likely to get a 7 if even at the moment they’re just getting a five, they should have been able to say, I know they’ve only got a 5, but that’s ‘cause we haven’t even covered that yet. It’s fine, they are seven student. Uhm, whereas .. it was completely impossible for home educated children to come up with an equivalent system. I felt so vulnerable it felt like it was a real money making opportunity for exam centres. (Sandra)

Although having home education regulated is a controversial topic amongst the parents, the majority saw that the lack of regulations on exam centres and exam boards made home educators at a disadvantage. There was a shared sense that the lack of regulations left parents feeling vulnerable and taken advantage of.

We are not asking for it to being any less rigorous I am just asking for it to be an easier process because otherwise you are at the mercy of some of these shady vendors [exam centres] (Nigella)

This parent was subject to exploitation of exam centres due to her children’s need for extra support during exams. This sense of vulnerability continued even further as she felt that experienced home educators (sometimes no longer home educating) continue to be active in the home education community by providing services at extra costs for home educating parents. They were called gatekeepers and sometimes not given correct information but were trusted.

The problem that home educators are up against is a political history and gatekeeping and if you fight them they make it harder for you ... again gatekeeping umm access to resources access to knowledge umm ex home educators who now have a vested an interest in being involved for their own purposes and are jeopardising what’s already been put in place over a number of years ... because that other person is making a business out of it so they are trying to undermine it by defaming it to line their own pockets, (Nigella)

Parents choose to home educate for various reasons and go to a great extent to fulfil their responsibility at any costs, as explained above. There did not seem to be a limit to what parents were prepared to do to provide educational opportunities for their children. Similarly, for exams, accessing exams sometimes may need involving other family members to achieve this, which may not be possible for all home educators.

We stayed in a travel lodge because their exams are Friday and Monday so we stayed in a Travelodge for a couple of days and made a little trip out of it which was nice but children that can’t home ed families that can’t afford it must be incredibly difficult. (Wendy)

Overall, parents believed the state should reconsider the education system and consider home education as an equal option within the education system. There was a desire to recognise home education as a division within the state’s education system that would allow their home educating young people to equitable access to nationally recognised qualifications. The lack of exam centres and the challenges in obtaining grades due to the pandemic made the inequalities in obtaining qualifications transpire.

Going forward we need to look at a fair system for all across the board between home ed and school. (Wendy)

Participants viewed gaps in the education system that could be improved to provide an equitable education with the freedoms that home education embraces. Due to the perception that the state does not recognise home education as a favourable choice, they felt disadvantaged and that their voice was not represented.

The thing is, we're not deviant. We're not doing anything wrong. This is totally in law. But the the people can do this. There has to be just like there has to be ramps for people in wheelchairs at the shop, even if only one person every six months goes in one that has to be provision for all these kids are at home. You can't just ignore them. (Gloria)

4. Discussion

The United Kingdom has a National Qualification Framework (NQF) to regulate and classify the possible Qualifications obtainable in the country. Moreover, it is a highly regarded framework and recognised internationally (Lester, 2011). The UK's NQF, since its initial implementation in the 1980s and the numerous reforms over the years, has catered in coping with the labour market, standardising the skills for the labour market (Allais, 2010; Raggatt & Williams, 1999), resulting in an increased number of 16 years remaining in full-time education. However, it is also evident that national frameworks for qualification can reduce choice, dictate against unconventional awards and impose what is valued as learning (Lester, 2001). This is reflected in the data of this study, as home educators' value other skills and learning as education and put great emphasise on the choice of qualification to be influenced by the child's interest and learning style.

Home educating students often choose a subject of personal interest and stagger examinations over several years to reduce the pressure of exams and balance home education activities, life and study. They also often decide to be exam ready at a younger age than the targeted age of 16 (GCSEs) or 18 (A-levels) due to the individual method of exam preparation.

Home educating parents invest immensely into their children's education and go to great lengths for their children to gain qualifications. The costs involved in this is evident in the findings as presented above. However, it seems evident that the lack of a regulatory body for home educators allows for inequitable access to exams due to the family's geographical, economic or social situation. A regulatory body could ensure that home educated students a) continue to benefit from home educated approaches b) continue giving subject/exam/exam board choice. It could ensure equal access to exams without overshadowing the children's opportunities and mandating national examinations. The lack of regulation on exam centres and exam costs for home educated students reinforces social and educational disparities. The right to education should include the opportunity to gain national qualifications until compulsory school age, allowing students to transition into whatever career path and adulthood.

Moreover, the lack of a regulatory body forced parents into relying on various other sources for accurate information when navigating through the exam process. As the data suggested, parents often rely on social media platforms where other parents share their experiences, which potentially could be biased and incorrect, as many factors may influence parents' and exam centres' decisions. Some parents were unaware there were grants available to access exams, partly due to the lack of skills, resources and time to obtain this information.

As stated above, not all home educated children will opt for a qualification. However, it is a common understanding that a child’s right to education expectantly results in a qualification at the end of their educational journey. However, this does not apply to home educators, depending on the family’s circumstances. This becomes problematic as it may put children at a disadvantage if families cannot afford or cope with the costs involved in exams, as illustrated in the findings; a further potential for systematic discrimination against children who are home educated regardless of their motives to home educate. Although the parents took the ultimate decision for their children to opt-out of mainstream education within their legal rights, the young person faces the consequences of this decision.

Without having an independent body regulating the access to exams leaves the option open for the parents of these young people to be exploited financially. Currently, it remains the parents’ duty to deliver their children education at whatever costs, including extra costs for access arrangements for young people with special educational needs. Additionally, not all parents can navigate the options available and expose their children to a wide range of subjects, exam boards, exam centres, and various national qualifications. Therefore, the only ones who have access to these are like the parents within this study, who have the capital to navigate the system.

4.1. Limitation

This study has proven to be limited in various areas. As the primary adult responsible for a child’s education, the mothers’ voice in this study brings forward only one perspective. Further research could incorporate other family members such as another parent to provide a more comprehensive research perspective. More importantly, the young people’s voice is lacking in this study. Due to limited time and ethical restrictions exaggerated due to the pandemic, this study could not include the young person’s voice. This study had a limited time frame and had to be conducted promptly to capture the experiences.

Moreover, unintentionally, the participating families seem to be very active, technologically advanced, white mothers. Only one participant shared that she had mixed-race children, which impacted her motives to choose to home educate. Although there is no empirical evidence if race or social-economical background would be a factor in their experience of exam cancellations, it would be worthwhile exploring to which extent their children have access to qualifications. As this is beyond the scope of this research, it is hoped that this may be explored in a future research project. In hindsight, the author believes that the potentially complex interactions between the topic and race and socioeconomic are significant enough for any further research to consider.

5. Conclusion

Parents shared the extent of the impact of the exam cancellations on them and their families. The financial and emotional costs, and the time invested, have emphasised the level of inequality the home educating young people are experiencing. It has been evident that home educating parents feel significantly disadvantaged by the education system by being isolated from government guidance and feeling unequal to school settings. Although they understand that it was their choice to opt out of the school system, the lack of regulations around exams and home education, in general, seems to affect home educated students negatively. Private candidates may sit exams for various reasons; however, being a private candidate is a home educating student’s only option to be awarded a national qualification that will be recognised. Specifically, English and Maths are essential for further progression, to which not all home

educating students currently have equitable access. It seems vital that the parents can support the child academically, emotionally, mentally and financially through this process. Seeing that many children opted for home education due to a deficit within the schooling system towards their educational needs, being home educated puts another potential disadvantage. Therefore, the author believes that although we must recognise the hindrance and financial burden that home educators are experiencing, dismissing the effects that are causing this is detrimental. Reviewing the lack of regulation in access to exams and equity within home education is urgently needed to avoid potential students being deprived of a qualification deemed necessary in the society built upon these foundations. This will avoid further social reproduction of inequality within our education system and not allow any students to experience the consequences of their educational choice would result in them feeling 'hanging off a cliff'.

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