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Home Education Inquiry Report for the Education Select Committee

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No More Exclusions (NME) submission of evidence to the

home education inquiry: November 2020

Introduction

This submission was created by No More Exclusions (NME), a UK grassroots coalition of over 150 teachers, teaching assistants, trade unionists, social workers, lawyers, youth workers, faith leaders, local councillors, journalists, academics, education researchers, SEND specialists, mental health practitioners, parent advocates, parents, and young people. Several members of the group worked together to gather the first-person testimony and academic research that informs this piece, which was written collaboratively after a series of digital meetings. NME focuses on race equality and inclusion in education - our work is about addressing institutional racism, unconscious bias, negative stereotyping and low teacher expectations as well as the wider structures and practices that create the context within which school exclusions exist. NME would like to offer a particular thanks to the individuals who contributed personal testimonies to this report.

Through an examination of previous literature on the topic of home education in England, we discovered that there is a significant lack of data on home education at present, which would suggest a minimal understanding of the difficulties and safeguarding issues associated with home-schooling. There are a variety of reasons why parents might opt to home-school their children, but scope of the research suggests that these reasons differ depending on location, age, income, etc of parents, which impact their ability to choose to home-school. Importantly, there is dire lack of research which explicitly illustrates the reasons, impacts, thoughts, perspectives, experience of Black families and home-schooling. As such we focused our research in this area in an at-

tempt to start a conversation and ensure the voices of Black parents/carers/children/families are represented when the topic of home education is being discussed.

NME is a Black-led and community-based movement. The evidence submitted seeks to illuminate the experiences of Black families, who thus far, have been disregarded across consultation processes. NME uses the term Black in reference to individuals who identify as having ancestral heritage from Africa and the Caribbean. We include a total of 8 case studies here which demonstrate the need for anti-racist and culturally responsive policy and practice. All participants were parents, carers, or guardians of pupils receiving home-schooling with between 3 months to 5 years of home-schooling experience. The average period of home-schooling across all participants was 27 months. Participants answered questions which sought to understand how and why they came to home school a child, any challenges encountered, experience of accessing help and financial support, the perceived positives, and any suggestions offered.

'Elective' Home Education: The Pros

Overall, home-schooling was seen as a positive opportunity by those who were home-schooling children when this was their choice:

> *"It's the absolute best thing I have done for my family"* **(Participant 7)**

For example, children were encouraged to be creative and independent, enabling them to pursue "entrepreneurial ventures" which were much more aligned with the child's interests:

> *"I was struck at how bright these kids were, how enthusiastic and eager to learn. They took joy in mastering new words and showed me , during their break times a glimpse of their interests and skills with Lego and transformer toys. I'm sure their teachers at school have no idea of their natural mastery of areas of physics or their jovial bantering and reasoning . Yet these boys could barely read or write. I put them in a structured programme and they took such pride in what they could see as gradual progress."* **(Participant 2)**

Participants describe home schooling as a largely positive experience for both the child, the educator, and the family:

> *"Spending more time together as a family and developing together."* **(Participant 5)**

They used the words "freedom" and "empowerment" to describe how they felt about having greater autonomy over the child's curriculum and "no restrictions to what they wanted to learn" as major positives of home education:

> *"Home-schooling was a very positive and educational experience. Being guided by my children's interests kept them fully engaged to explore many topics marginalised or excluded from the curriculum in a holistic manner."* **(Participant 4)**

Home educators also shared a sense of dissatisfaction with the content and quality of what is taught in school:

> *"School curriculum not fully delivering the moral, spiritual and cultural needs of my children. One size fits all approach was not fully engaging my children."* **(Participant 4)**

Participants shared a worry that formal education did not meet the "holistic" needs of their children:

> *"Enriched learning opportunities, museum visits, attend diverse range of local events, observe discussions on topics such as racism and community empowerment."* **(Participant 4)**

Racism was something that participants felt was not adequately addressed by, or within, the school system:

> *"Having allowed my child to attend school I know that I can home-school my child and achieve better grades without him having to experience the under handed racial barrage of complaint I received from the school."* **(Participant 8)**

And further, felt that their child's safety was compromised when they were at school and this often lead them to choose to home educate:

> *"My child was physically unsafe at school."* **(Participant 7)**

This is particularly important as research on homeschooling in America, conducted by Mazama & Lundy (2012), found that Black parents chose to home school their children as a means of 'racial protectionism'.

'Elective' Home Education: The Cons

Lack of Guidance for Parents

Home educators described a lack of practical guidance as a challenge to

Home-schooling

> *"Trying to come up with our version of a curriculum was sometimes quite challenging."* **(Participant 3)**

One participant listed "lack of support from LA" as challenge faced whilst home-schooling and a review of the literature also indicated that the formal and legal guidance around home-schooling, particularly for parents was insufficient. The 2019 DfE guidance for parents states that parents 'must ensure that the child receives an efficient and suitable full-time education so long as he or she is of compulsory school age.' (p.13). However, at present, there is no legal guidance as to what constitutes 'efficient', 'sufficient' or 'full-time' education so any attempt to assess children and parents in their home would inherently be based upon a deficit model which perpetuates the discrimination of racially mi-noritised children, young people, and families. This should include explicit and clear guidance on how parents inform the Local Authority should they feel their child is being 'off-rolled' from education. Parents should have access to ade-quate advice on the options that are available to them when they engage in elective home education. One participant told us that:

> *"The child is not welcome into school setting if they are not under them full-time."* (Participant 8)

Therefore, we stress that advice should include how to make arrangements for a child to receive *part* of their education at a school (flexi-schooling) as listed in DfE guidance (2019). Where the Local Authority did offer support, participants felt that this was dis-ingenuous:

> *"I have been able to support her continued home based education through my own sacrifice. Financial help often comes with strings attached."* **(Participant 5)**

And also used to monitor rather than support the family:

> *"The local authority is more concerned with monitoring rather than sharing what resources are out there. More support comes from follow home educator networks."* **(Participant 5)**

Lack of Financial Support for Parents

Home educators described a deficit in financial supprt as a major challenge to home-schooling. Particularly, participants noted that contributions toward the cost of paper, ink, and printing would be important means of financial support.

One home-schooler explained that they "know how to access teaching re-sources" and had the funds to purchase them but was aware that this was not a realistic option for the majority of parents:

> *"Fortunately I was able to order the resources I didn't have from the internet. I paid for it all as their parents certainly didn't have this money."* **(Participant 2)**

57% of participants said they had been able to access support pertaining to the access of educational resources, whilst the remaining 43% said no. This could indicate an inconsistency in the level of support that is available to those who are home schooling or home schooled.

Lack of Social Support for Parents

Home educators described limited social support as an additional challenge to home schooling; one participant who had home schooled for two years described their experience as "good but isolating". Participants were likely to seek out social support in the form of other home schoolers:

> *"Collaborating with families of other home school children helped a lot to address my initial concerns with socialising."* **(Participant 4)**

COVID-19 Pandemic

We suggest that it is also worth considering the fact that we are yet to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon children, young people, families, schooling, and education and we feel it would be in haste to make recommendations for 'best practice' at this point. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic pushed many school children into home education for intermittent periods, we feel that it would be necessary that any stats or figures are considered within the context of whether they were recorded before or after the pandemic as perspectives are much more likely to have been changed by circumstance and any statistics gathered during the lockdown period should not be subsumed under 'elective' home education. For example, when home schooling during the UK lockdowns and school closures, one educators described:

> *"Involving parental support was a challenge. I think they had more fundamental concerns, like their rent and food. The children were sometimes tired from not having had enough sleep."* **(Participant 2)**

Building further upon our 2020 *Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services* report (No More Exclusions, 2020), we echo that: i) young people's voices should

form a core part of the decision making process but in this case would stress that parent and family voices should be equally valued across this inquiry, ii) Learning is a social experience, and any guidance or policy relating to home education should make space to acknowledge and support this, and iii) equality data should be published monthly by all Local Authorities to ensure that 'off-rolling' can be identified and resisted.

'Elective' Home Education: Safety or Securitisation?

The precise number of home-schooled children is unknown, which would suggest that there is a very limited awareness or understanding of the difficulties, or safeguarding issues, associated with home-schooling thus far. NME feel that without a proper understanding of how home-schooling is working, or not working to date, any guidance which seeks to 'safeguard' is more likely to contribute to the securitisation of Black families. As home education is governed by the Local Authority and not Ofsted, there is a direct and immediate risk of children, young people and their parents being further securitised and criminalised. We suggest that before thinking about regulating home education, there should be an explicit and open reflection which demonstrates awareness of the diverse barriers which impact young people and their families differently; if the government is looking for ways to 'safeguard' or regulate home education, there is a real risk of furthering the securitisation of racially minoritised pupils and families.

Elective home-schooling suggests that individuals and/or parents 'opt in' to

home education, but it is important to acknowledge that this is not the reality for many families. The 'off-rolling' of pupils once they get close to assessment age illustrates one process whereby young people and families are essentially forced into home education, rather than by choice. As such, there should be explicit and clear guidance on how parents/guardians can inform the Local Authority should they feel their child is being 'off-rolled' from education. Additionally, as home education is governed by the Local Authority and not Ofsted, there is a direct and immediate risk of children, young people and their guardians being further securitised and criminalised. We suggest that before thinking about regulating home education, there should be an explicit and open reflection which demonstrates awareness of the diverse barriers which impact young people and their families differently. These experiences should *not* be recorded under

the discriminatory 'BAME' category as this subsumes a diverse population of people and contributes to their minoritisation by ethnicity. The disproportionate rate of Black Caribbean youth categorised as having SEND is more reflective of the need for a culturally responsive approach to understanding trauma and distress. Clash of cultures is often cited as the main reason for Black pupils exclusion (Graham et al., 2019) but given that the majority of these children and British born suggests that the problem is much more than just 'culture'.

In addition to this, given that Local Authorities are entitled to make 'informal' enquiries about what education is being provided at home, a clear and explicit distinction between when said enquiries becomes formal, and the consequence of 'non-compliance' should be made. In the same vein, as Local Authorities are able to issue School Attendance Orders (SAO) to parents, then clear and explicit guidance on how parents can contact the Secretary of State to have court orders revoked. There are many reasons that the parents/guardians of a child may decide to home-school their child. Elective home schooling suggests that individuals and/or parents 'opt in' to home education, but it is important to acknowledge that this is not the reality for many families.

Recommendations

Based upon feedback from participants, we make the following suggestions to make home-schooling a more positive and fruitful experience:

- Support pupils and parents to access specialist tutors, sports equipment, and science labs, and advice in schools.

- Financial support for those who are home-schooling to obtain appropriate technological devices and access to the internet with the same discount given to schools available.

- A dedicated network or support system for home-schooled pupils and their families to share expertise and/or socialise, perhaps via membership to clubs, activities.

- Access to a directory of home-schooling parents, tutors, age appropriate resources, and community spaces.

Summary

As a final note, it is vital that these families are not subject to individualisation in the neoliberal sense but supported to flourish in individual ways. These experiences should not be recorded under the discriminatory 'BAME' category as this subsumes a diverse population of people and contributes to their minoritisation by ethnicity. Given that racial neoliberalism has erased Black with the term BAME – the dire lack of research which explicitly illustrates the reasons, impacts, thoughts, perspectives, experience of Black families and home schooling suggests that any recommendations or resources generated at this point in time to promote home schooling would not be rooted in any form of evidence and be purely speculative.

References

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