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Book Reviews

Global Perspectives on Home Education in the 21st Century

Rebecca English (editor)

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Global Perspectives on Home Education in the 21st Century: Rebecca English (IGI Global)

The legal regulation of elective home education in the UK has been a troublesome issue for policy makers and practitioners for a number of years. In 2009 the last Labour government attempted to introduce what would have been the first specific legislation on the subject,¹ and more recently, in 2019, Lord Soley's Private Member's Bill made similar proposals for a system of compulsory registration by parents and enhanced monitoring by local authorities.² In the decade between these two attempts at reform a political sea change is detectable as the perception that something needs to be done is now widely shared across all the political parties. The Department for Education's 2007 Guidance was revised in 2019 in a manner that emphasised far more than before the positive obligations on local authorities to oversee home education and at the same time the Government launched a consultation on the need for legislative reform.³ Ofsted has undertaken research and highlighted concerns about the relationship between home education and both illegal exclusions (off-rolling)⁴ and unregistered schools and 'out of school settings';⁵ the House of Commons Education Select Committee held an inquiry into the issue in 2020/21;⁶ and in October 2020 the Children's

¹ Children, Schools and Families Bill 2009, cl 26.

² Home Education (Local Authorities) Bill (HL) 2017–2019.

³ See D Monk, 'Elective Home Education: commentary on the new guidance to local authorities from the Department of Education' (Birkbeck, University of London, 2019). Available at: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/27389>, last accessed 3 June 2021.

⁴ Ofsted, *Exploring moving to home education in secondary schools* (October 2019), No 190040, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/exploring-moving-to-home-education-in-secondary-schools, last accessed 3 June 2021.

⁵ See D Monk, 'Out of school education and radicalisation: home education revisited' [2016] Ed Law 17.

⁶ House of Commons, Education Committee, Home Education, transcripts of oral evidence hearings (24 November 2020 and 23 March 2021), available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/620/home-education/>, last accessed 3 June 2021.

Commissioner for Wales initiated a formal review of the Welsh Government's action in this area – the first time the Commissioner has used her power to order a review under section 72B of the Care Standards Act 2000.⁷ Furthermore, while the focus of all of the above has been on *elective* home education, the Covid pandemic has blurred the boundaries between home and school as sites for learning and brought to the fore the feasibility and possibilities of online education.

Against this domestic backdrop Rebecca English's collection of 16 richly diverse international essays is timely and provides an opportunity to step back and reflect on commonalities and specificities of home education as a growing global phenomenon.

The contributors to the collection are from nine countries and most are academics working in the field of education – broadly defined. None are lawyers but the law is a recurring issue for many. It is important to note from the outset that all the contributors are to varying degrees defenders and supporters of home education. And indeed many are also practitioners, a fact that is acknowledged in different ways; for example Irena Kašparová from the Czech Republic describes herself as an 'anthropologist by profession, homeschooler by heart'⁸ and Chris Krogh and Giuliana Liberto from Australia note the fact by way of a formal 'conflict of interest' statement.⁹ But while much of the work here can consequently be termed 'advocacy research', and indeed one of the contributors, Brian Ray, is a leading advocate for the home-schooling movement in the US,¹⁰ it would, for a number of reasons, be wrong to conclude from this that the contributions are 'unscholarly'. First, none of the authors hide their allegiance to the cause. Secondly, in some cases the authors clearly identify the limits of much of the existing research which celebrates the outcomes of home educated children; for example Gina Riley, from the US, makes clear that the data is based on self-selecting participants.¹¹ Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the extensive literature which critiques home education is thoroughly referenced and to varying degrees openly engaged with by many of the authors.

Two of the leading critical commentators referred to – Apple and Bartholt¹² – are both from the US and the dominance of the US in this field of research is notable. Four of the contributors in this volume are from the US – more than from any other country – and as is

⁷ Children's Commissioner for Wales, *A Review of the Welsh Government's exercise of its functions: Home Education and Independent Schools* (February 2021), available at: www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ReviewofWG_FINAL_ENG.pdf, last accessed 3 June 2021.

⁸ I Kašparová, 'Homeschooling as a Barometer of State Power and Control in the Czech Republic', 251.

⁹ C Krogh and G Liberto, 'Reliable or Risky? Competing Arguments Framing Home Education's Regulation'.

¹⁰ BD Ray, 'An Overview of the Worldwide Rise and Expansion of Home Education Homeschooling'.

¹¹ G Riley, 'The Academic and Social Outcomes of Those Who Have Homeschooled', at 93.

¹² M Apple, 'Away with all teachers: The cultural politics of homeschooling' (2000) 10(1) *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 61. M Apple, 'Rightist Education and Godly Technology: Cultural Politics, Gender, and the Work of Home' (2011) 1(1) *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research* 5. E Bartholet, 'Homeschooling: Parent Rights Absolutism vs Child Rights to Education & Protection' (2020) 62 *Arizona Law Review* 1.

noted by others, most of the empirical research to date has emerged from there too. To a certain extent this reflects the simple fact that the practice is more popular and widespread in the US: currently around 2.5 million home-schooled students, growing at a rate of two percent – eight percent a year.¹³ But the US focus also impacts on how the issue is spoken of and framed in both political and pedagogical discourses, in particular the emphasis on parental rights, a critique of the role of the state, and individualism. Discussion of the motives which inform parents' decisions to home educate bring these issues to the fore.

Many of the contributors here take as their starting point in discussing motives the now classic typology of 'ideologues' (conservative, fundamental Christians) and 'pedagogues' (Holtian child liberationists) established by Van Galen in 1991.¹⁴ Brian Ray and M Mahruf Shohel et al, the only UK contribution, both helpfully expand and complicate that binary and highlight the increasing diversity.¹⁵ Lisa Puga's ethnographic research provides a particularly nuanced analysis of the motivations underlying the increasing number of African Americans choosing to home educate, which blurs and complicates the mainstream understandings and assumptions. In stretching the 'normative boundaries' she highlights the significance of grass roots educational organisation and problematic aspects of current school institutions – especially for non-White youth – and argues that:

'continued reliance upon ... tropes of homeschooling-as-private – whether to bolster one's pro-homeschooling agenda, or to critique homeschooling as dangerous to US society – perpetuates a problematic characterization of homeschooling and its cultural significance ... many critics of homeschooling operate from a belief that society would be more harmonious, democratic, and open-minded if schools were improved rather than promote the flourishing of various alternative options, such as homeschooling ... However this view fails to take into account the fact that many Black homeschoolers have yet to see an institutional option that achieves the utopian ideals that progressive reformers envision as possible.'¹⁶

These arguments add an important political dimension to and in some ways present an implicit challenge or at least a provocation to the more traditional criticisms of schooling in home education research and advocacy, examples of which in this collection include Canadian researcher Rozanne Dioso-Lopez's celebration of 'slow time'¹⁷ and the other Canadian commentators Carlo Ricci, Brooke Growden and Debbie Michaud's argument, that 'mainstream schooling wounds people deeply'.¹⁸ The concerns here articulate the enduring legacy and application of the ideas of John Holt and Paolo Freire about self-directed learning

¹³ Ray, above n 10, 4.

¹⁴ JA Van Galen, 'Ideologues and pedagogues: Parents who teach their children at home' in JA Van Galen and MA Pitman (eds), *Home schooling: Political, historical, and pedagogical perspectives* (Ablex Publishing, 1991), 63–76.

¹⁵ M Mahruf Shohel, N Akter, M Rahman, A Mahmud, M Ahsan, 'Home Education in the United Kingdom: Policy, Practice, and Challenges'.

¹⁶ L Puga, 'Addressing a Cultural Critique of US Homeschooling With African American Homeschoolers' Perspectives', at 20, 28.

¹⁷ R Dioso-Lopez, 'Slow Education From a Homeschooling Perspective'.

¹⁸ C Ricci, B Growden, D Michaud, 'Willed Learning: There Are Gentler and More Peaceful Ways', 100.

(SDL) and ‘unschooling’.

A more critical analysis of the thinking underlying the ‘unschooling’ movement is provided by Noah Romero from New Zealand. Reflectively engaging with and acknowledging Apple’s critique of the potential for home education to be a vehicle, intentionally or otherwise, for individualistic, privatising, neoliberal politics, he observes that ‘we must accept that unschooling is not immune to them’.¹⁹

In endeavouring to be true to the liberatory potential of SDL, Romero brings Holtian child liberationist thinking into conversation with more recent queer and decolonising texts and practices and, unusually in this collection and in home education literature more generally, writes from a child rights perspective (only one contribution, by Ben Riley from the US, is by a home educated child).²⁰

Another nuanced contribution that seeks to unpack the ‘motivations’ question is provided by the editor Rebecca English, an Australian educationalist. By focusing on the lived experiences of home educating parents, she suggests that ‘accidental’ and ‘deliberate’ are more helpful categories for distinguishing how and why people choose to home educate and that this distinction is too easily overlooked by the ideologue/pedagogue binary.²¹ In doing so she helpfully draws attention to the significance of experiences of school and in particular the challenges facing children with special educational needs in many school environments. This is complemented by a thoughtful contribution by Avishag Edri and Henriette Dahan Kalev, from Israel which explores the implications and motives of mothers who home educate – a key issue on the ground but one often missing from more macro commentaries.²²

The different meanings of ‘parental responsibility’ have been much debated by family lawyers and it is particularly pertinent to home education, highlighting as it does potentially contradictory roles for the state. In the context of home education it begs the following questions: should we see the choice to home educate as simply one alongside a preference for faith-based, selective, private, single-sex, comprehensive or boarding schools, or is it in some ways a decision that takes on *too much* responsibility? If the state does not enquire into the parental reasons for making the above school-based educational choices – choices which for many are illusory and which have immense social and often negative consequences for others²³ – to what extent should the motives informing home education be a matter of concern? And if they are equal choices – no more or less ‘responsible’ in the eyes of the state – should they be subject to the same degree of scrutiny? John Eekelaar’s classic formulation of parental responsibility from 1991 as –‘state of nature or nature of the state’ is deeply apt here.²⁴

In answering these questions the law takes centre stage and the contributions, while

¹⁹ N Romero, ‘Towards a critical unschooling praxis’, 66, 73.

²⁰ B Riley, ‘My Experiences as a Home Education Graduate’.

²¹ R English, ‘The Accidental Home Educator: A New Conceptualisation of Home Education Choice’.

²² A Edri and HD Kalev, ‘It is all in the Name of Good: The Motives for Homeschooling of Israeli Mothers’.

²³ See N Harris, *Education, Law and Diversity: Schooling for One and All?* (Hart, 2020).

²⁴ J Eekelaar, ‘Parental responsibility: State of nature or nature of the state?’ (1991) 13(1) *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 37.

informative when read individually, alongside each other provide a fascinating comparative picture of the possibilities and contingent uses of law as a tool to regulate home education.

Two chapters by authors from the Czech Republic, educationalists and sociologists Yvona Kostecká, Tomáš Kostecký, Andrea Beláňová, Kateřina Machovcová,²⁵ and the anthropologist and home educator Irena Kašparová,²⁶ in different ways provide a vivid picture of the shifting fortunes of home education under Habsburg, Communist and democratic governments. Legalised for primary school age children in 2004 and extended to secondary school age in 2016, the new legal framework gives – on paper – considerable power to schools to permit home education (or not) and to stipulate conditions. But as parents can choose *where* to register and as schools receive central funds for children they have oversight of (25 percent of that received for registered pupils), Kostecká et al suggest that the relationship between schools and parents is one of customer/provider, a blurring of the boundary between the public and private but one that operates in a market-like fashion. Rather than ‘fight for the parent’s right to choose’ they suggest that ‘formally following the rules but actually ignoring the authorities’ chimes with the essence of Czech mentality. It is an insightful example of their broader point that legislative frameworks reflect:

‘not only actual political interests and lobbying strength of both the pro- and anti-home-education advocate groups but also ... specific histories of individual countries, various historical experiences with home-education, and differences in cultural traditions.’²⁷

The contributions from Mexico²⁸ and Italy²⁹ both demonstrate this insight. Notably absent from the collection are commentaries, albeit in some ways for understandable reasons, from any of the many countries where home education is illegal, in Europe, for example, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Spain and Sweden.³⁰ The political debates about the issue in these countries – and the different rationalities’ histories – is comparatively illuminating. Harmonisation has not been attempted here and the European Court of Human Rights, in upholding the ban in Germany on three occasions now, has emphasised the wide margin of appreciation.³¹

²⁵ Y Kostecká, T Kostecký, A Beláňová, K Machovcová, ‘Home-Education in Czechia: Twenty Years of Experience’.

²⁶ I Kašparová, ‘Homeschooling as a Barometer of State Power and Control in the Czech Republic’.

²⁷ Ibid, 141.

²⁸ L Ramírez Vera and M Guadalupe V Bucheli, ‘Homeschooling in Mexico with Educational Platforms: Design, Techno-Pedagogical Instructional, and Practical Use of Internet-Enabled Home Education’.

²⁹ G Giovanelli and L Piromalli, ‘Practising “Istruzione Parentale”’: Becoming a Homeschooling Parent in Italy’.

³⁰ For an insightful overview see D Hána and Y Kostecká, ‘A comparison of home education legislation in Europe from the perspective of geography of education’ (2020) *Research Papers in Education*: DOI: 10.1080/02671522.2020.1864762.

³¹ D Monk, ‘*Wunderlich v Germany*: enforcing compulsory schooling’, Strasbourg Observers Blog, available at: <https://strasbourgobservers.com/2019/02/05/wunderlich-v-germany-enforcing-compulsory-home-schooling/>, last accessed 3 June 2021.

In the context of Australia, Krogh and Liberto reveal a diversity of responses between federal states, contrasting the high regulation of New South Wales with the low regulation and collaboratively designed regime in Tasmania, which in their view is less harmful. They acknowledge, however, that one of the challenging questions in systems of low regulation is: ‘should every parent claiming to be home educated be accepted as doing so?’.³² This is a key question, for while the advantages and beneficial outcomes of home education are emphasised by most of the contributors here, in practice the main difficulty facing local authorities in England and Wales is accessing information about home educated children and, where they are aware of them, determining what information can satisfy them that a child is being provided ‘a suitable education’; a problem compounded by the fact that the government has made clear its intention not to define in any degree of clarity what that illusive concept means.³³

One of the reasons why home education is a growing phenomenon is undoubtedly the fact that information technology, home computers, and the internet make it a more feasible realistic option, and two contributions examine different aspects of this transformative potential. Liliana Ramírez Vera and Ma Guadalupe Veytia Bucheli, from Mexico, provide an insightful overview of the literature and identify the ability to create virtual communities online.³⁴ Renee Morrison’s Australian research analyses the use of search engines, comparing parental and child uses; noting that, ‘the limitations of technology are accepted as limitations of what knowledge is and what knowledge is worth seeking’, she concludes that ‘search engines are yet to live up to their revolutionary educational promises’.³⁵

Home education is an issue and practice that too often gives rise to polarised positions. This is often unhelpful, but perhaps not surprising as the issue goes to the heart of debates about the role of the state and tensions between children’s and parental rights. Located at the intersection of disparate concerns about child welfare, social inequalities, educational and psychological development, and, increasingly in the UK and elsewhere, ‘radicalisation’.

This collection of essays provides a rich source of information, reference, literature reviews and food for thought. The number of home educated children is steadily growing in all the countries examined here and this is a trend that is likely to continue. The motives are complex and diverse and Information Technology will continue to be a critical factor. But while the contemporary nature of the challenge the phenomenon poses is clear from all the contributions, another facet also emerges – sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, which is that the debates have their origins in the promotion of compulsory education by industrial states in the late nineteenth century. A crucial moment in both the history of childhood and of the modern state, the mass building of schools replaced in a remarkably short period of time far longer practices of home education.³⁶ In making sense of the present, it might be worth revisiting the complex calculations and rationales that heralded that revolution. For as Puga wisely concludes in her contribution here:

³² Krogh and Liberto, above n 9, 233.

³³ Monk, above n 3.

³⁴ Ramírez Vera and Bucheli, above n 29.

³⁵ R Morrison, ‘Internet Use in Home-Education: Enablers and Barriers’, 216, 221.

³⁶ For a fascinating account of this long history, see: C de Bellaigue (ed), *Home Education in Historical Perspective: Domestic pedagogies in England and Wales, 1750–1900* (Routledge, 2016).

‘To better understand the why of this phenomenon involves raising further epistemological questions as to the functionality, purpose, and meaning of “school” in the twenty-first century.’³⁷

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³⁷ Puga, above n 16, 28.