

Education professionals who home-educate – from maverick anomaly to bridge-building opportunity?

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Abstract

In UK law, home education is a legal and equal alternative to mainstream schooling. It is increasingly popular, although it has a poor public image and politically has been associated with safeguarding issues, radicalisation and inadequate educational standards. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a substantial minority of home educators are themselves education professionals. This research evaluates the position of education professionals who home-educate (EPHEs), seeking to ascertain their capacity to act within social networks as conduits of understanding around home education. Interviews with four EPHEs were analysed, using both deductive and inductive coding, to explore the dual identities and positioning of EPHEs as both mainstream schooling professionals and minority home-education practitioners. In particular, analysis focuses on the social-capital potential inherent in these double-facing identities. Using social network theory, particularly the concepts of bonding and bridging, three main categories of this position are explored: identity, bridging potential, and community and political consciousness. Using the four participants as examples of a type, the paper concludes that EPHEs do have the potential capacity to build authentic relations of greater understanding and reciprocity between home educators and the wider public and political community and that this potential could be harnessed in productive and transformative ways that would enhance democracy and social justice in educational opportunities.

Keywords: home education, home-education policy, home-education regulation, social network theory, social capital theory

Introduction

Home education has increased globally since the 1980s (Ray, 2021), with the UK internationally considered a beacon of enlightenment in its considerable educational freedoms and its emphasis on parental responsibility and individual need (*Education Act 1996*). This broad and personalised scope allows home-educating families to construct flexible and individualised educations (Pattison, 2022). However, despite this legal freedom, the position for home educators in the UK is an uncomfortable one. Since the 2009 Labour government review of home education (commonly known as the Badman Review), there have been numerous reviews, consultations and cross-party calls for increased regulation, alongside allegations of harm caused to home-educated children. Concerns have been expressed around safeguarding, socialisation, radicalisation and the ability of parents to educate, and, while no evidence base has been established (Charles-Warner, 2015; 2019; Mukwamba-Sendall, 2019; Pattison, 2020; Rothermel, 2004), home education has laboured under a poor public, political and media image (Pattison, 2018; 2020; Rothermel, 2015).

Concurrently, relationships between local authorities, who have a duty to ensure that children receive a 'suitable' education (DfE, 2019), and home-educating families have frequently suffered from collective and individual tension (Mukwamba-Sendall, 2019; Pattison, 2020; Stafford, 2012). Mutual suspicion and mistrust have fed into entrenched political positions and an 'us and them' mentality that emphasises the differences between home and mainstream education and their proponents (Morton, 2010; Pattison, 2020). Theorising the situation as a moral panic (Pattison, 2020) may elucidate, but offers little prospect for improvement.

Romanowski (2001), commenting on the similar situation in the US, called for a rethink around education authority/home partnerships that might benefit all children, wherever they are educated. He argued for cooperation between home and school education in a flexible system that can offer the best of both worlds. Similar calls for enhanced understanding and collaboration between authorities, schools and home educators are regularly made by academics and home-educating groups (Charles-Warner, 2021; Gillie, 2022; Mukwamba-Sendall, 2019), one example being that of access to public examinations for home-educated candidates (The HE Byte, 2021). Limited forays into flexi-schooling, an arrangement by which pupils are registered at school but not required to be in school full-time, have been successful, with proponents arguing that it allows for adaptive, bespoke arrangements that combine the strengths of home and school (Humphreys *et al.*, 2018; Kendall and Taylor, 2016; Poultney and Anderson, 2019). Certainly, there are myriad opportunities which flexible home/school partnerships might offer, and which could range from hosting independent exam candidates to providing inclusive social and sporting opportunities, as well as part-time schooling. While the potential is vast, exploration can only be predicated on mutual understanding, cooperation, shared educational values, collective action and community creation and will need to be underpinned by effective and respectful communication.

As a contribution to this challenge, the current research uses social network theories of bonding and bridging to explore the position of education professionals who home-educate (EPHEs). It explores the identities of EPHEs as boundary-crossing individuals with the capacity to act as bridge-builders and to contribute to better understanding, more positive relationships and, ultimately, social and educational change. Like the work of Murray *et al.* (2020), this research does not seek to enhance understandings of social capital theory so much as to seek insights and potential ways forward in relationships between school and home education.

Demographics of home education

Home education in the UK has been growing in both numbers and public awareness since the 1970s; the home-educating charity Education Otherwise put the number of home-educated children in England at 83,974 in April 2021 (Charles-Warner, 2021). Research suggests that this covers a diversity of families including Romany/Traveller (Bhopal and Myers, 2016; D’Arcy, 2014), Muslims (Myers and Bhopal, 2018; Pattison, 2020), SEND children (Kendall and Taylor, 2016; Parsons and Lewis, 2010) and gifted children (Winstanley, 2009). There is also evidence that a subset of home educators are themselves education professionals. In 1995, Roland Meighan estimated that 25–33% of home educators were professional teachers (Meighan, 1995); anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant minority may be so today (Suitable Education, 2019).

Home educators are a diverse collective, and, while research suggests there may be some widespread traits of home education (Pattison, 2022), practices, pedagogies and philosophies are individual and subject to wide variation. The collective status rests on the legal category of pursuing “education otherwise” (*Education Act 1996*); therefore, despite the existence of numerous close subgroups (Stafford, 2012), the collective is based on impersonal affiliation through a single shared and defining characteristic (Davis, 2014). Furthermore, although the position of home educators is politicised and a number of national organisations exist, the collective has no form of democratic representation (Stafford, 2012). Given both these factors, social and political integration may be pursued through bridge-building at multiple points across the divides between home education on the one hand, and schools, local authorities and policymakers on the other. Putnam (2002) argued that developing social-capital bridges is important to prevent the splintering of society into disconnected interest groups with little trust for each other. Developing bridging capital provides a ‘connective tissue’ for society and a way of enabling social cohesion (Davis, 2014). Home education presents as a situation in which bridging offers a way of promoting understanding and interaction with the mainstream to the potential benefit of education as a whole.

Education professionals who home-educate

Where home and school education are presented as divided (and divisive) forms of education, those who move between the two can be seen as crossing from one practical and ideological world to another. Perhaps the best-known example of such a ‘mind shift’ is the ‘conversion’ of the US educationalist John Holt, who went from being an award-winning schoolteacher (Holt, 1990) to a home-education advocate (Holt, 2003). Holt disavowed schooling as education and urged parents to home-educate as a means of allowing the natural learning instincts of children to flourish in ways that schools cannot emulate. More recently, blogs from both the UK and Australia and articles such as Roy (2000) from Canada have gathered examples of education professionals who have chosen to home-educate their own children. In many of these examples, teachers, like Holt, have changed their minds about education, crossing a philosophical as well as pedagogical boundary, leaving school-based careers to pursue home education with their own children.

Croft (2013), herself a teacher turned home educator, suggested that EPHEs may be seen either as hypocrites (‘school is good enough for other people’s children but not mine’) or as the more acceptable face of home education (‘at least a teacher would home-educate properly’). However, in her sample of 55 Australian EPHEs, neither of these views was voiced. Instead, Croft’s participants saw home education as an option alongside, rather than in conflict with, school. Home and school education offer families a choice based on suitability rather than being in opposition to, or competing with, each other. In this sense, Croft’s research illustrates the philosophical position drawn out by

Pattison (2015), which argues for home education to be understood as ‘different to’, rather than better or worse than, school.

Considering the influence of their teaching experiences and training on their home-education practice, Croft’s participants referred to the confidence which their professional experience confers. Additionally, they cited their ability to speak the language of education, allowing them to ‘translate’ home-education practices into formats recognised in school education. In this lies the implicit understanding that home and school education are different, and understanding one in terms of the other requires an act of adjustment. Thomas and Pattison (2014) argued that the language and concepts of school education do not always transfer easily to the different contexts, practices and aspirations of home education. Lees (2014) pointed to a ‘commensurability gap’ impeding comparison, and home educators cite a lack of understanding of their position (Rothermel, 2015). Finding ways to communicate effectively is a first step towards lessening (rather than simply crossing) the divide and to opening up productive dialogue, which can, in turn, lead to positive educational relationships, including fit-for-purpose policy. EPHEs may be ideally placed to undertake this work at a time when lack of understanding is having important policy implications.

Theoretical framing – EPHEs as conduits of social capital

This research uses social network theory to consider how EPHEs may act as conduits for sharing experience, knowledge and understanding of home and school education. It does this by exploring how social capital – resources located within human relationships (Farrell, 2007) – can flow through social networks. Gittell and Vidal (1998, cited in Szreter and Woolcock, 2004) postulated three types of such capital with the capacity to operate through the creation of different types of social network (Hawkins and Maurer, 2010). Bonding capital pertains to relationships among members of a network who share characteristics and context. Bridging relates to relationships that exist between dissimilar types of people, while linking refers to relationships forged between those of differing power and influence. Homophilic characteristics of bonding relationships may be age, gender, life situations, beliefs or shared socio-economic or crisis situations (Lin, 2001). These bonds can engender strong and sympathetic relations and even a degree of situational control (Claridge, 2018); however, their influence is likely to be limited (Rienties *et al.*, 2015). Such relationships are likely to exist between home educators forming mutually supportive groups.

Bridging relations are heterophilous in nature, involving actors who are dissimilar in terms of a shared identity and between whom connections are therefore weaker. They may lack trust and may even be conflictual (Claridge, 2018). However, they also have the potential to promote understanding and to create connections between formerly divided groups. Such relationships might exist between home educators and professional educators, who may find it hard to create positive relationships, but, where they exist, these relationships may become conduits of understanding. Linking social capital is a subset of bridging capital, entailing relationships which are built vertically, not only across social divides, but also across power differentials (Claridge, 2018). These relations are based on weaker connections but have the most influential outcomes, as those of different power positions enhance their understanding of each other. Such relationships might be between home educators and local authority staff, or home educators and policymakers who have the potential to alter the environment for home education.

Where social groups exist in bonded enclaves without effective bridges, conflict may arise between groups. This is arguably the current situation of home education, where home educators have felt pressured to withdraw into their own communities, while suspicion and misunderstanding have flourished in the main and policy stream (Pattison, 2020). Davis (2014) noted how such antagonism can trickle down to personal and even intrapersonal conflict. For example, mistrust may be present

between the collectives of home and mainstream educators, and individual relationships between particular families and particular professionals may emulate this. Finally, an individual who home-educates and is also part of the mainstream education system – for example, a professional teacher who home-educates – may encounter personal conflict. However, this potentially difficult situation may also offer possibilities. Referring to the “betweenness” of individuals who are placed at juncture points between disparate social actors, Rienties *et al.* (2015) contended that the functioning of these individuals may be especially important for bridge-building. Similarly, Farrell (2007), drawing on the seminal social capital work of both Coleman (1997) and Bourdieu (1997), argued that while social capital is, by definition, embedded in social relations, it is realised through individuals who, as Murray *et al.* (2020) argued, may or may not put it to purposive use. Individuals may embrace and work on the dissonances of their situation, or they may arrange their allegiances in ways that mitigate conflict for themselves. Thus, Davis (2014) argued, the practice of individuals in this dynamic is critical.

Studying a culturally mixed group of students, Rienties *et al.* (2015) noted the ability of some individuals to form bridge-building relationships which can develop into further cooperative relations across the wider group. Similarly, Davis (2014) argued that trust and cooperation can be extended across groups “to produce generalised society-wide trust” (p. 3). Once established, these relationships offer opportunities for overcoming difficulties and encouraging growth, revitalisation and development (Hawkins and Maurer, 2009). At its most powerful, therefore, social capital can generate change and positive transformation (Farrell, 2007).

Turning to the question of what enables such relationships, Rienties *et al.* (2015) identified particular characteristics which they attribute to bridge-building success, for example cultural sensitivity, motivation and communication skills. Larsen *et al.* (2004) pointed out that a base of bonding capital, as well as other resources, is necessary and went on to argue that bridgers must also possess a social conscience, driving them to act on community, as well as individual, issues. Nevertheless, it seems there is no set form for such relations to take, and Claridge (2018) maintained that bonding and bridging categorisations may hide a range of complexities in situation and character. Davis (2014) pointed out that individuals vary in the extent to which they participate in and move between groups so that social groups and networks are dynamic and connections can arise in different circumstances and ways.

Bridging relationships may arise spontaneously, as Hawkins and Maurer (2010) described in relation to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Victims, survivors and citizens crossed the usual social boundaries to offer and accept assistance as they faced a common crisis. At other times, relationships can be deliberately fostered, as Zeldin *et al.* (2013) recounted in a US youth work project which set out to foster intergenerational relations by crossing segregating divides and building cooperation and common values. Joint working and power-sharing enabled emancipatory relationships and community enhancement within a social justice framework. Such examples may be considered as bridging and linking relationships actively furthering democracy (Lin, 2001).

Hawkins and Maurer (2010) cited similar projects, including in the UK, aimed at addressing deprivation and exclusion in segregated and disadvantaged communities. They went on to argue that social work can actively work with social capital to hinder or strengthen both individual and community development. Farrell (2007) enlarged this point, noting the way in which reference to the creation and use of social capital has entered the political discourse and popular imagination as a tool for positive change. His examples included then Prime Minister Tony Blair calling on social capital as a means to create and enhance community cohesion, reduce crime, raise education standards, and enhance care of vulnerable members of society.

Such initiatives suggest a way forward in the current impasse for home-educating relationships, which have been marked until now by community segregation and their image as a practice alien to wider

society. This research evaluates the position of EPHEs in terms of their capacity to act as conduits of understanding in a bridge-building capacity. It asks specifically whether EPHEs a) have and b) would be able to deploy bridge-building capacity as outlined in the circumstances and projects discussed above. The following analysis is aimed at revealing possibilities rather than putting any kind of onus on individuals; however, it is hoped that it might posit a way ahead as other applications of bridging and linking resources have done.

Epistemology

This research adopts a broadly functionalist position in which social capital is seen as an inherent component of some social relations, from where it can be accessed as a resource by particular social actors. Like Coleman (1997, cited in Farrell, 2007), I have taken social capital to be productive, influential and capable of making a social difference. However, any such capacity has to be enacted through individual subjects – their values, context and contingencies – and thus signifies subjective emergent potential (Davis, 2014), rather than ontological reality. While social capital may be recognised through independent, rationalised frameworks, its deployment is enacted through the constructed values and shared meanings of interpretivism (Fox, 2008).

Methodology

Recruitment

An initial snowball recruitment plan was pre-empted by news of the project spreading organically, leading to a number of EPHEs contacting me with a view to participating. The four participants who have aided with this paper are the foremost tranche in a wider cohort who expressed interest. This sample has no representative claim, yet the proactivity and interest that led participants to initiate contact is fitting for the characteristics of bridging individuals in terms of motivation and leadership (Rienties *et al.*, 2015). All participants are female and hold teaching qualifications, as well as having professional teaching and home-educating experience. This cultural capital is taken as underpinning participants' bonding capacity in both groups of educators as well as being an integral asset to their bridging capacities. Apart from one participant, who chose to keep her own name, participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

Table 1 below shows that participants had teaching experience ranging from 3 to 12 years. Two participants had further experience in consultancy work and childminding. Experience of home education ranged from less than a year to three years. Experience of home education is measured from compulsory school age. (Although arguably education begins from birth for all children, this is not generally or politically counted as home education.) All participants were the principal home educator in their household.

Data collection

Individual semi-structured interviews of between 40 and 50 minutes were conducted and recorded via Zoom. One participant chose to read the questions and respond in writing so that she had more time to gather her thoughts. The interviews explored motivations for teaching and home education, professional and home-education identities, the application of professional experience to home education, and the ways in which participants saw their experiences interacting.

Participants were given the opportunity to discuss a late draft of the paper and to suggest changes to both their own contributions and the more general message of the paper. Such participant validation

is endorsed by Griffin and May (2018) as being congruent with interpretative analysis and may also be considered a fulfilment of ethical considerations towards situated knowledge (Ali and Kelly, 2018). In this case, it also recognises the central role of the individual in creating social network links. All participants were satisfied with the analysis and framework, and no one suggested changes.

Table 1 Participants' education qualification and HE experience

Name	Professional qualification	Years actively in teaching/ education as a professional	Level of teaching and subject	Age of child when HE began	Length of time home-educating
Anne	PGCE History	12 10 in education consultancy	Secondary	Compulsory school age	3 years
Sarah	PGCE Secondary – English NVQ Childcare and Development	9	Secondary – English Primary	Compulsory school age	2 years
Hannah	QTS – Teach First	8.5	Secondary – Art, History, SEND	Compulsory school age – attended nursery, didn't start school	Less than 1 year
Kathy	QTS – Disability Studies	3–4 in schools 3–4 in childminding (alongside HE)	Early years teaching Child-minding	Compulsory school age – half a term flexi-schooling, then home education	1.5 years

Data analysis procedures

Analysis was undertaken through a combination of a priori codes and emergent data-driven themes (Armat *et al.*, 2018). Deductive coding was initially extracted from a small selection of research and theory papers considered to be of relevance to the research question. These guiding codes were used for initial organisation (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) and are given in Table 2.

Where data was found to overlap codes or where codes were found to be redundant or in need of reconceptualising, these were amended to reflect inductive and emergent meaning (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This was a reiterative process, following multiple readings of the data and entailing both the merging and expansion of deductive categories to retain the flow of participant meaning, while addressing the research concerns of bonding and bridging relations, to finalise the categories, shown in Table 3.

Table 2 **Deductive coding categories and their sources**

Research	Deductive categories
Rienties, Johan and Jindal-Snape (2015)	Evidence of group belonging
	Evidence of bridging capacity
	Positive attitude to difference
Claridge (2018)	Inclusive attitude
	Outward-looking attitude
	Identity harmony
	Identity dissonance
Larson <i>et al.</i> (2004)	Community consciousness
Davis (2014)	Indication of common goals
	Indication of individual goals
Croft (2013)	Confidence in home education
	Language and discourse

Positionality

As an erstwhile home educator and researcher in the area for over two decades, the lack of constructive dialogue and understanding between home and mainstream education has become increasingly frustrating both personally and politically. Home education is a politically charged subject; the English *Schools Bill* (2022), which would have brought in compulsory registration and increased monitoring of home education, was dropped in December 2022, but the subject is unlikely to lose salience. As a consequence, no research in this area can avoid its political nature; indeed, as Deacon *et al.* (2007) pointed out, “no research project is politically innocent” (p. 13). At a time in which mistrust and misunderstanding have such portent, this paper is a call for bridge-building and for more productive ways forward.

Table 3 **Finalised categories of analysis**

Category	Subcategories
Identity	Self Community Negotiating the EPHE status
Bridging potential	Individual – self-understanding Reflexivity and willingness to learn Strategic – language and discourse
Community and political consciousness	Home education Wider politics of education

Presentation and discussion of emergent categories

For the presentation and discussion of the finalised categories, the participants’ own words are used to clarify the link between themes (Griffin and May, 2018).

Identity

Self

Bonding capability relies on group membership, itself a product of self and community identity. For the EPHEs, this pertained to both their professional and home-educating identities. For three of the participants, becoming a teacher preceded home-educating experience and constituted a career decision informed by life experience. Sarah said: “I fell into teaching, coming from a family of teachers. I’d got a young family and ... I just thought ... I can do my bit, share the love of literature. And, yeah, I just fell into it, really.” Anne noted: “I left university and went straight to be a teacher ... I am just a product of that institution and it’s so much part of my history and therefore my identity.” Kathy was undertaking voluntary work abroad, which sometimes involved standing in for a teacher: “I remember a real light-bulb moment, thinking how much I enjoyed it and got such a buzz when they would do, say or understand something new. I decided I wanted to do this when I came back to England.”

Hannah’s path was more convoluted. She was home-educated herself, and the decision to join Teach First was a substitute for the charity work she initially wanted to become involved in. However, she quickly found her niche teaching in SEND and her professional identity became of long-standing importance. Now a full-time home educator, she retained her teacher identity: “I’m quite proud of my identity. I haven’t taught for five years now, and I still would call myself a teacher, like I’m quite proud of it.”

Community

Moving from the professional status of teacher into home education, participants were joining a new community, taking on a new identity and crossing what Sarah described as an “us and them” divide. Although Sarah “fell into” teaching, her exit from the career was less easy and followed experiences of pressure and ill health working in school. Within the home-education community, she found what she termed “a bit of scepticism” towards her erstwhile career, but also acceptance: “I think mostly that understanding that they know what the school system’s like; I know a lot of people [home educators] whose children were in school at some point.”

Like Croft’s participants (Croft, 2013), Sarah did not simply transfer from one ‘side’ to the other. Rather, she continued to frame home education and school education as options, despite her own difficult experiences: “I’ve got two older children [who] have been through the system, they were fine with it.” Anne’s passage into home education appeared a smooth one. She had already given up teaching when she began meeting up with home educators as her daughter transitioned from nursery to home education: “about six months before she would leave nursery, she’d already got some home-ed friends. We went to a forest school and all that stuff and then it was a nice smooth transition for her.” When her son was born, the home-education world made an immediate social life for him: “he was always tagging along home-ed stuff. He grew up with loads of other babies who tagged along home-ed stuff, so he’s had his friends now since he was two and a half.”

Hannah, with her more convoluted journey, was slightly ambivalent about her position in the home-education community. As her own home education had been instigated at her parents’ wishes, she felt it not to be part of her self-identity. Even in her current position as a home educator, she suggested a distance between herself and home education: “I don’t hugely get involved in the home-ed community.” Like Sarah, her position suggested greater nuance than taking sides. She had a clear pride in her teaching career – she described the special school in which she had worked as “really, really good for the kids” and had considered school for her son – and yet she had settled on home education as the best choice for him.

These three participants seemed to be at slightly different junctures in their positioning between the two educational worlds and in their own intrapersonal balance between them, an illustration perhaps of Rienties *et al.*'s (2015) ideas of “betweenness”, tempered by Davis’s (2014) note that personal nuance may give rise to a variety of experience. The ambivalent positioning may be crucial for maintaining bridging capacity, rather than simply moving from one educational arena to another.

Negotiating the EPHE status

Part of identity and bonding within home education meant negotiating previous careers for their bearing on the new situation. The impact ran in both directions – how home educators reacted to teachers who had left the system, and how mainstream educators reacted to professionals now home-educating. Kathy acknowledged that it could be hard to “admit” to the mainstream that she was now a home educator: “I worry about telling people that I home-educate my children. You just don’t know what the response will be.” However, she saw her professional teacher status as a buffer to negative opinion: “Being a teacher, it would make it harder for them to say I am not capable of teaching.” Professional teacher status meant increased acceptance and credibility as a home educator: “When I started meeting people locally, they were like, ‘Oh, you’re alright then, you’re a teacher. Yeah, you’ll know what to do.’” But there was also uncertainty about the combination: “I don’t put it out there that I used to be a teacher. I don’t think it’s really relevant.”

Hannah, when asked how people reacted to her as a home-educated student entering teacher training, simply said, “I didn’t tell people.” Having experienced and partaken in both school and home education, she felt an ongoing ambivalence about her position, a reflection of in-between status and the need for trust: “Right now, I wouldn’t tell someone unless I really trusted them, I think.” When it came to negotiating the EPHE status with fellow home educators, Anne could see that her teacher status might disquiet others: “I have to be careful ... not to sound like I’m giving an opinion about what they’re doing, because ... they might think that I’m judging their family and what they’re doing and that’s a bit worrying.”

Sarah, on the other hand, found respect within the new community; on occasion, fellow home educators were asking her for professional advice, an indication of bonding due to the trust involved (as also exemplified in the study by Davis (2014)): “I do get a lot of people coming to me for advice, and it might not be something that I’ve actually got experience of, but I think, maybe they come to me because I’ve been in the profession.” Kathy did her own research into this question, asking home-educating friends how they viewed her professional status. One spoke of being able to draw on her expertise: “I love being able to pick your brains for ideas (and especially phonics know-how).”

As above, seeking advice indicates trust. However, another friend felt the intimidation mentioned by Anne: “I was, and still am, a little scared of you! I don’t think it’s because you’re a teacher, but you were my child’s teacher!” Both friends talked about how knowing a teacher who had decided to home-educate gave them confidence in the decisions they had taken: “I think it’s reassuring having a home-ed friend who is an ex-teacher. I remember telling my mum that if you had decided to home-ed then I must be on to something.”

Relations with both the educational mainstream and other home educators indicate that possibilities for bridge-building exist; both friends expressed that they were reassured by Kathy’s decision to home-educate, illustrating on the one hand professional respect, and on the other that their actions constituted an informed comment on both schooling and home education. However, there also seemed to be some ambivalence towards EPHEs and a degree of uncertainty about their reception. The final remarks from Kathy’s friends, stating that they found reassurance in EPHE existence, are a hint at wider potential and political influence, beyond individual relations. They are an indication of Rienties *et al.*'s (2015) thesis that bridge-builders are not simply individuals connecting to two worlds but conduits who can influence whole communities.

Bridging potential

Individual – self-understanding

In addition to the dual identities that positioned them as ‘between’ educational alternatives, EPHEs also showed individual characteristics and strategic competencies in line with those identified by Rienties *et al.* (2015). Individual characteristics displayed were self-confidence, confidence in their educational knowledge and a capacity to question, reflect and change. The EPHEs expressed confidence in their home-educating ability, a feeling which owed substantially to their professional training and experience. Kathy described being self-assured in her pedagogical role, as she had resources, knowledge and skill that she could draw on as and when needed: “It helped provide me with some knowledge, skills, tactics and ideas on what I could do to bring on certain areas of development ... I feel like I am able to discreetly introduce the children to a ‘next step’ idea from observing their play.” Hannah pointed out that home educators can be beset by doubts about their educational choices, qualms which she said did not apply to her: “A lot of home-educating parents [are] ... always questioning themselves. Am I good enough? Am I doing the right thing? ... Well, I don’t have that ... I just know that I’m doing the right thing, and I don’t doubt my ability.”

This confidence meant that the EPHEs considered themselves more than equal to local authority enquiries on their home-education provision. Sarah said: “If it comes to the yearly meeting or whatever they’re going to do, I will have the confidence to talk through what I’m doing because I’ve spent years going through the EYFS or going through the national curriculum to link, and I can easily say, well, that’s covering that, that’s about that.” Hannah also noted: “I’m sure if I just write to the local authority and say I’m a fully qualified teacher, I could probably do a one-page letter and they wouldn’t bother me.”

This confidence however was not simply about warding off authority on their own behalf. Sarah and Kathy had both experienced fellow home educators drawing on their professional expertise. Sarah saw ongoing potential in such relationships: “I do think that everybody needs help and, yeah, I think ... there’s quite a few home-ed teachers who would happily try and kind of get some ideas together.” Sarah’s confidence here is channelled into ideas of community action and active ways in which EPHEs could deepen commitment and bonds with fellow home educators.

Reflexivity and willingness to learn

While practical pedagogical help might flow from the EPHEs to the home-education community, Kathy felt that ideas could flow in the other direction as well: “I have learned far more about how children learn since leaving teaching than I ever learned as a teacher ... I felt the value of what we were learning was based on that set school curriculum, and I’ve had to let go of this and value all learning in all forms.” Anne held up her own practice for reflection and aspiration: “I wish I could be more flexible and more go-with-the-flow, but my schooling and therefore my teacher in me is very restrictive about being open to learning when it comes.”

Both Anne and Kathy used potential tension as a productive site for contemplation of their educational philosophy and practice and an opportunity for development and growth. Anne stated that her teaching “comes into place with my home-ed philosophy, to try and have some kind of a mix of the two, but it’s a constant, always reviewing why we’re doing something”, while Kathy said: “no doubt I will continue to hit stumbling blocks which allow me to research, grow and evolve”.

The capacity to embrace reflection, adaptation and change mirrors the characteristics of Rienties *et al.*’s (2015) bridging students, who are described as being adaptable, motivated and positive about difference and learning. It also augurs well for externally facing conflict-resolution strategies (Rienties *et al.*, 2015) that the EPHEs are able to work productively with their internally felt challenges.

Strategic – language and discourse

Strategic competencies were demonstrated in the uses of educational discourse to enhance communication. These are not identical to the characteristics cited by Rienties *et al.* (2015) but are similar in their capacity to assist a positive flow of understanding between factions. Beyond these personal characteristics, the EPHEs also cited their strategic advantages in understanding and owning the language and discourses of education from both sides. They presented themselves as natural bridges of communication. Anne said: “We can speak both languages. We know all the jargon from both camps and, also, we can draw upon real-life examples that can connect with people ... so I could tell a head teacher a classic story that they would know about certain family, certain kids, or a certain PGC student or teacher and they would connect in ... because I’ve been in this community.”

Hannah reiterated this stance: “People that know both sides are going to be sort of an ambassador.” She likened the situation to her job as a journey manager in a special school where she had mediated relationships between the work of the school and the local authorities in a way which she spontaneously described as “bridging the gap”. In these ways, the EPHEs identified themselves as conduits, able to create bridges of understanding.

Community and political consciousness

Home education

Davis (2014) argued that successful bridge-builders need to be inspired by more than their own interests; they also need to be committed to the community good. Teaching has long been regarded as a vocation that implies a commitment to social goals and the common good. Such a stance towards their profession was clear from the way that EPHEs described their commitment to both the practice and purposes of education. Anne described teaching as a vocation and a way of channelling her desire to make a difference and to further social justice: “I always wanted to work with children ... I did a lot of youth work when I was a teenager ... I was also interested in social justice.” Hannah’s rationale for teaching as a substitute for charity work was that: “It felt like giving back. I thought this would be something that’s a giving-back thing to do.”

The strength of feeling about education demonstrated principle, commitment and passion that did not end with leaving the formal occupation. Anne described her “strong beliefs” in certain aspects of education: “I really passionately believe in child-led learning.” Kathy found childminding gave her the freedom to exercise her pedagogical beliefs: “[I could] teach in the way I wanted – real-world, play-based and child-led.”

This commitment to the bigger political picture of education also extended to the EPHEs’ awareness of themselves as being at the intersection of home and mainstream education. Anne pointed out that her professional status could also promote misunderstanding of home-education philosophy and pedagogy:

it’s actually sometimes a disservice to home education, to tell people you’re a teacher, because what the people who don’t know much about home education usually say to me is, “Oh well, that’s OK, you can do it because you’re a teacher.” And that’s kind of missing the point. It’s also a disservice to the wonderful home educators I know, who are all probably better at it than me, because they’re not a teacher.

Hannah went wider into the political positioning of home education from a social justice standpoint. Misunderstanding about home education, she felt, intersected with prejudgements about other aspects of society and individuals: “A lot of the judgements about home ed is not about the education; it’s about the identities of the people, whether or not they are qualified to teach their own children in a class- or ethnicity-type way, that’s the feeling I get.”

Here Hannah points towards the power differentials that position not just home education but also certain home educators (Myers and Bhopal, 2018; Pattison, 2020). Similarly, Farrell (2007) argued that social capital and therefore bridging potential do not stand alone but are contextualised in political, economic and cultural relations. While linking relationships that operate across power differentials might address such a situation, the social capital of EPHEs and other home educators cannot be isolated from such contexts. Bringing intersectional discrimination towards home educators to light is a social justice aspect of relations that should be addressed in ongoing discussion within and outside home education.

Wider politics of education

Farrell (2007) discussed the power of social capital as a force for social justice and transformation. The idea of improving education for the future was strongly championed by the EPHEs, underpinned by professional and personal confidence and by their understanding of the educational aspirations and practices of both the mainstream and home educators. Where these differed, they acknowledged the divide and the work that would need to be done to bridge them. Hannah said: “I don’t feel a divide is inevitable, but I don’t feel like mainstream education is having a real conversation about what education really is, and what it’s for, and who it benefits.”

The EPHEs saw the current separation as a space of possibility, rather than division. Kathy, reflecting on her experiences of education across home and school, felt that schools could, without radical alteration, adopt some of the insights from home education: “I feel like we could learn a lot from ... the home-ed community.” Her vision was of a freer, more autonomous, child-led environment: “Learning is not something that has to be forced onto children; they want to learn and will.”

Anne reiterated the theme of trusting children more: “[Schools] could learn that you can trust children more ... If you provide them with the resources and be a facilitator and give them the time to do it, you know they will teach themselves ... It’s about trust in children more and about the freedom.” Like Kathy, she felt this could be achieved within the framework of schooling and mainstream aspirations: “I can imagine how you could set up curriculums to be so much more free and still achieve all the things that the government want you to achieve. That’s possible.”

As Anne laid out her vision for incorporating the best of home education within the structure of formal education, she demonstrated her knowledge of both school and home education and her bridging position between educational worlds. She extended this to children, whom she believed to be ideally located, as the recipients of education, to act as conduits of understanding:

I think if schools could somehow open up a conversation with the children who left school to be home-educated and ... ask them what’s different about your learning now compared to school and what’s different about your motivation ... they could find out from children, children’s voices, they would find out what children want ...

Her vision expanded as she took on the vexed relationship between home education and mainstream schooling and tied it to the quest for social justice that had brought her into teaching in the first place:

When you provide a liberal space in the community, where everyone can engage on their own terms, ... it’s a democratic act. School is not that because it’s a closed institution, and you have to conform to it in order to be a part of that ... Instead of closing that idea off, we should ... give people the right and access to go into the community themselves to get what they want out of it. If we think about social justice ... a child has the right to the riches of their community.

Anne’s thinking here is on the transformative level; indeed, she described herself as not satisfied with the current reality. Instead, she envisaged turning education from closed systems of schooling into liberal community enterprises, open to all. Anne here is demonstrating her own bridging capacity in

both her insider knowledge and community commitment, but also in the transformative vision she is reaching towards, which is akin to the fullest potential of social capital described by Farrell (2007).

Concluding remarks

This paper set out to explore the potential of EPHEs to act as conduits of social capital in bridging relationships between the worlds of home and school education. The four EPHEs who contributed here actively reached out to the research project and demonstrated, in context-specific form, characteristics of identity, bridging potential and community consciousness in ways which could potentially allow for greater understanding, conflict management and even transformation of the relationships between mainstream education practices and home education.

In particular, the EPHEs demonstrated a willingness and capacity to enhance communication and to act as bridges between home and mainstream education in ways that could promote heightened understanding. Their familiarity with the professional world of education and the possibilities of home education gave them the insight to combine the two and to see how the strengths of home education could enhance and add possibilities to the aspirations of school. Their vision and thoughts show how what has been generally seen and treated as a divide could in fact become a continuum, working to strengths and engendering new possibilities and partnerships. Furthermore, the EPHEs explained how such action would be a democratic act and a furtherance of social justice, directly linking the politics of home education to wider political, social and educational goals.

As has been found in other social projects (Zeldin *et al.*, 2013; Hawkins and Maurer, 2010), actively seeking out and engaging those with bridge-building capacity opens up possibilities of new visionary and inclusive practices. These could include EPHEs reaching into both communities to find spaces of understanding and practical activities (educational, sporting or social opportunities), bringing communities together in harmonious and fruitful ways. In the current fraught political situation, such an enterprise could offer greater understanding and inclusive ways forward in both local and national policy terms and assist in creating partnership and understanding, rather than conflict and dissonance.

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The author confirms that this is their own work and there are no known conflicts of interest, financial or non-financial, associated with this publication.

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