**Who controls the agenda?  Theological perspectives on state-controlled home education in the UK**

**Abstract**

Questions regarding the dynamics of power and control involved in formulating the learning agenda for home educating families arose due to the UK Government’s proposed Schools Bill in May 2022. Empirical research was prompted by concerns from Christian home educators about state interference in their child’s home education, due to perceptions that religious values were being undermined and the ultimate responsibility for raising their child was under dispute in the light of the proposed Bill. Theological underpinnings, Christian perspectives and consideration of holistic socio-cultural contexts were integral to explorations of control of the learning agenda through the lens of Christian home educators. The findings problematise external authorities dictating curriculum content, teaching methods or frameworks to families who have opted to educate their children outside of the mainstream school system, since such approaches are counter to the distinctive nature of a democratic society. Lived experiences of collaboration versus persuasion, and participants feeling mistrusted, devalued and side-lined have all led to a sense of suspicion and concern about authority. Greater dialogue is therefore recommended to enhance understanding and collaboration, mutual trust and cooperation across all parties.

**Keywords**

Christian, home education, theology, voice, control, UK

**Introduction**

*Who controls the learning agenda within home educating families?*

*What role do religious beliefs and values play in this agenda?*

*To what extent is it appropriate for the state to intervene or control this?*

These are the questions to be explored within this paper. The empirical research was instigated due to concerns from Christian home educators about state interference in their child’s home education, particularly perceptions that their religious values were being questioned and undermined as they asked who had ultimate responsibility for their child’s education and socialisation (Ashbridge, 2009)? This paper therefore seeks to scrutinize the theological perspectives which are integral to a discussion about control of the learning agenda through the lens of Christian home educators (Bizzell, 1990).  Within this dialogue it is key to also consider the holistic socio-cultural contexts which mediate learning experiences (Fensham-Smith, 2021) and may contribute to the discourses being conveyed (Mulya & Aditomo, 2019).  Against this backdrop, this paper focusses on the discourses contained within the reflection of Christian home educators, collected through an online survey with 462 responses. However, educational effectiveness and attainment in home educating is beyond the remit of this paper.

The number of families who EHE (Elective Home Educate) in the UK has been increasing (Lees & Nicholson, 2017), and in 2021 there were 81,196 children and young people being electively home educated, with this number having significantly risen over the past five years (ADCS, 2021).  The most common reasons cited by Local Authorities (LA’s) were ‘health concerns relating specifically to Covid-19,’ ‘philosophical or lifestyle choice’ and ‘health/emotional health’ (ADCS, 2021).  Religion was not explicitly listed as a reason, although it is possible that this is captured within the category of ‘philosophical or lifestyle choice.’  In contrast to what LA’s reported, Mitchell (2020) stated that parents rejected today’s neoliberal agenda governed by capitalist aims and objectives, holding firm beliefs about individual freedoms and child-led approaches to education.  This relates to the ‘mass production model, applied to children through the apparatus of government,’ which can conflict with various interest groups and ideologies, leading to impersonal and ineffective schools (Lubienski, 2003).  Nevertheless, the 1996 Education Act[[1]](#footnote-1) decrees that all parents are responsible to ensure that every child of compulsory school age receives efficient full-time education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude, or any special educational needs, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.  Blok and Karsten (2011) emphasised that this increase in prevalence of home educating has raised questions about the need for inspection to become part of the political agenda if specific problems become the subject of social care and regulations, although in the case of home education, parents take direct responsibility for their child's education and the government cannot be held responsible for how they provide it, nor for the results.  ADCS (2021) highlighted that LA’s have a duty to establish whether suitable education is being provided but do not have a role in the assurance of this and reported that LA’s were concerned about the lack of powers available to them to ensure that all elective home educated children are safeguarded and receiving a suitable education.

In many nations, home educators are inspected with a focus on protecting the child's interests and well-being, and in some cases the extent to which they are receiving satisfactory education and progressing appropriately (Blok & Karsten, 2011).  In contrast, home educators in the UK are not obliged to follow a national, or any formal, curriculum, nor is there a requirement to sit public examinations as EHE gives parents significant autonomy to personalise what a suitable and efficient education might look like for their child (Fensham-Smith, 2021).  The freedom currently accorded to English home educators has been a matter of policy concern for many years and has included matters of safeguarding and educational standards as well as the consequences of restricted religious teachings (Rothermel, 2015; Pattison, 2020). These have been used by some to argue for increased control over home education in both practice and legislation (Purcell, 2023). Although this forms an important part of the context of the current debate, it is beyond the scope of this paper to do more than to point towards the influence these concerns may have on the subject matter of this paper.

Yet in May 2022, the UK government announced a new Schools Bill, through which they sought to raise education standards across the country by supporting schools to join multi-academy trusts, introducing registers for children not in school and giving Ofsted more powers to eradicate unregistered schools operating illegally.[[2]](#footnote-2)  Home educators were alarmed at the potential repercussions of this on them.[[3]](#footnote-3)  There was uproar across many home educating sectors,[[4]](#footnote-4) and some Christian organisations spoke out against it.[[5]](#footnote-5)  In the ensuing debates and discussions surrounding the Schools Bill, there was a myriad of theological ideas and rationales put forward to support the case of Christian home educators. The Schools Bill did not progress through Parliament at that time, although the same principles and arguments remain in different guises.  This conflict about the role of government in the delivery of home education connects with considerations of Bizzell (1991), examining who controls the classroom agenda.  This with therefore be explored within this paper.

**Home educators in contemporary times**

The 1996 Education Act (section 7) sets out that parents are responsible for the education of their children either “by regular attendance at school or otherwise”.  The delegation of education to school does not absolve parental responsibility and parents continue to be legally responsible for securing and ensuring the education of their children, no matter how this is realised. Whilst the Act seems to equate education and school attendance, there is widespread agreement that education is more than this.  Parental responsibility for children certainly goes beyond the formal concerns of classroom performance.  At the same time, it is acknowledged that while the state and parents may both have responsibilities towards children, they also have different orientations over what matters in terms of education.  The state, for example, has an interest in ensuring a suitably qualified workforce for the future.   Parents, on the other hand, may feel that their main educative function is to hand on to their children values, culture, heritage, traditions, worldly wisdom and, of course, religious faith.

The reasons for deciding to home educate are many and varied, may change over time and may be a complex mixture rather than one or two easily expressed ideas. For many families taking on home education, it is dissatisfaction with the competence of school to deliver effective formal education that prompts their decision.  These families feel that school has failed or is likely to fail their children’s academic needs.  Some families have different pedagogical visions, for example about child led education which they wish to put into practice.  For other families the social and personal realities of school, including bullying, may not suit their child and may lead to extreme child distress that begs an alternative path (Gillie, 2020).  Still other families may feel that State provided schooling does not fit with their religious beliefs and personal values. This last reason has certainly been cited as the catalyst behind the large Christian home-schooling movement in the US (Kunzman, 2010; Stevens, 2003).  Although religiously motivated home education has received much less political prominence in the UK, it has occasionally been raised as a matter of concern (Pattison, 2020).  Certainly, the unease of some parents with some school curriculum content because it contradicts religious beliefs has come to light in recent times. The protests of Muslim parents over certain aspects of school curriculum content have been particularly highlighted (Vincent, 2020).

Where differences in values and religious beliefs have been cited as the driving force behind home education, analysis has frequently framed the position of home educators as being already outside ‘normal’ society; home education being a sign or symptom of their already ‘other’ status.  Morton (2010), for example, cites the perception of home educators as rather strange hippies.   Lubienski (2000) argues that home educators have extracted themselves from the common causes of society.  Religiously motivated home education has often been similarly cast both in the UK and the States.  The powerful home-school Christian movement in the US has been described as rejecting established democratic culture and being motivated by the parental desire to bring children up isolated from mainstream society and “in their own particular religious and social views” (Bartholet 2020, p 11).  In a similar tone, Muslim home educators in the UK have been cited as isolationist and potential radicalisers of their children (Pattison, 2020).  The idea that home educators are on the fringes of society and are holders of extreme, fundamentalist and conservative religious thinking has a popular appeal and presents a straightforward argument for regulating and curtailing their educational activities (Bartholet, 2020).  In these arguments, school is presented as a place in which these different traditions may come together and where children and young people can learn about differences in belief and diversity in society.  They will also learn how to live together peaceably and co-operatively and with respect for one another (Diez de Velasco, 2007). However, in increasingly diverse society, schools attempting to cater for wide diversity in values are, almost inevitably unable to bring this into actuality. Rather than learning to live with those of different beliefs, children may never fully come to understand what it means for anyone to live within a consistent frame of moral and shared values (Bushnell, 1861).

Contemporary times have highlighted that UK society is a pluralistic and diverse one in which numerous values and beliefs, religious and otherwise, co-exist.  School has also been cited as a place in which certain cornerstone beliefs are fundamentally undermined because they are not reflected in the values explicitly held in schools, let alone in the myriad and subtle nuances of school life.  Faas et al, for example cite the situation in Ireland where schools embracing religious diversity are unable to adequately address the needs of children from minority faith backgrounds (Faas et al, 2016).  However, it fails to grapple with the more complex issue that all education purveys values, that multi-cultural and religiously pluralistic societies do not necessarily share values and that both parents and state have legal, political and social interests in the education of children.

Parents also have a personal interest.  The argument is sometimes couched as a clash of rights - parents rights to educate their children in their own beliefs versus children’s rights to choice and an open future (Bartholet, 2020).  Others, such as Permoser and Stoeckl (2020) see a logical contradiction in shielding children from particular (secular) influences through home education whilst arguing for a right to do so through appeals to moral pluralism within a liberal and post-structuralist framework.  However, as society continues to diversify (Bai, Ramos and Fiske, 2020) there is reason to suppose that more and more families may be motivated to home educate by virtue of perceived school failure to uphold values consistent with their religious beliefs.   Kunzman (2010) argues that religious home schooling provides “important opportunities for civic conversations across ideological differences” ( p 18) and that this is an important question which needs to be sensitively addressed, rather than dismissed.  Vincent goes on to point out that the resolution in cases of parental protests has been sought in legal decisions with reference to the Equality Act (2010) and court injunctions to quell physical protest.  As she argues, the recourse to law highlights the paucity of civic and public discussion around the question of how different beliefs can share the space of education.  This seems a particularly prophetic insight given the fears engendered in Christian home educators by the Schools Bill.

**Theological perspectives on responsibility for the family**

When considering the notion of family within the parameters of Christian home education, it is key to consider theological perspectives, wherein the child is often so closely associated with their family that they are often treated as a subset of ‘family,’ and hence are ultimately the responsibility of their parents (Asbridge, 2009).  There is distinct understanding of the value of corporate efforts between the home, church, community and state in raising and educating children (Bunge, 2008), although biblical teachings highlight the responsibilities of parents (viewing children as blessings in Psalm 127:3-5; training and guiding children in Proverbs 22:6; teaching children God’s commands in Deuteronomy 11:18-19; showing compassion in Psalm 103:13; not provoking them in Colossians 3:21; and enabling children’s access to Jesus in Matthew 19:14).  Osiek (1996) argued that contemporary nuclear families are not normative, but ultimately Christian families should strive for the biblical values of faith, hope and love.  Hence, Knowles (2009) believes that Christian parents are expected to teach their children how to function as valuable members of society.  Parents are known to have significant influence upon their child, particularly during the early years (Berne, 1972; Underdown, 2007), and Surr (2011) emphasised the spiritual significance of early attachment relationships.  Many have called contemporary Christian parents to take more responsibility for transmitting their faith to their children (Turner, 2010; Barna, 2019).  Maas (2000) proposed that the impulse to sin is often rooted in the failures of one’s childhood, due to the way parents treat their offspring.  This concurs with the thinking of Bushnell (1861), who attributed blame for deficiencies in the piety of children to the spiritual health of their parents and congregation.  Whilst Harris (1998) would disagree, believing that parents are less influential than society would suggest, some view their primary responsibility as educating their child so that their heart condition is toward God, correct their sinful nature, shape and mould their mind to God’s standard, expose them to his glory and his love by teaching them his ways (Ginty, 2022).  This resonates with the notion of Deuteronomy 6:6-9, whereby parents are instructed to pass on God’s commandments to their children throughout daily living and everyday activities, so that families are the ‘forming centre’ of a child’s faith formation (Thompson, 1996).  To this end, the vocation of Christian parenting has been described as fathers and mothers acting as apostles, bishops and priests to their children (Strohl, 2001).  In this way, the family home is viewed as a training ground for spiritual development; a place where interactions are imprinted with God’s goodness (Ginty, 2022).  In terms of training a child, Ashbridge (2009) highlighted the complex questions of who a child belongs to, who has authority over the child and how far that authority extends. Indeed, Osiek (1996) emphasised that defining Christian values is a highly complex and often controversial process, particularly traditional so-called Biblical family values of obedience and submission.  The New Testament calls for an ethos of peaceful domestic existence and living in reverence with one another (1 Timothy 5:1; 1 Peter 5:5).  Underlying this, ecclesial authority is indicated to guide parenting style (1 Timothy 3:2-7).

Effective faith transmission could be through retelling Bible stories (Westerhoff, 1980; Worsley, 2010; Stonehouse, 2006), telling faith stories (Stonehouse, 1998), praying together (Cavalletti, 1983) and celebrating life together, expressing thankfulness to one another and to God (Westerhoff, 1980).  This resonates with Joshua 4:6-7, whereby a stone monument served as a reminder for the Israelite community, and enabled children’s questioning to occur, indicating that markers of key moments may be used to aid a child remembering meaningful faith experiences and encounters and facilitate a child’s questioning.  This enables teaching not merely to be memorial recall or rote memory, but understanding of these commands (Ginty, 2022).  Within this, mutual listening and environments of trust are key (Stonehouse, 1998) and enabling children to personalise their faith journey rather than merely provide formulaic responses is highly valuable (Cavalletti, 1983).  Enabling children to feel safe and secure in their family environment enables them to raise questions of a spiritual nature and explore faith for themselves (Hart, 2003).  However, Stonehouse (1998) deemed it important that children do not feel expected or forced to talk about spiritual experiences, but rather are facilitated and supported in exploring their experiences.  An ethos of openness and flexibility is therefore key for the strong social structure of family, reflecting the ethos of early Christianity, which was more flexible than the contemporary ideals suggest (Osiek, 1996).

**Some understandings of Christian education**

The earliest notion in Christian literature of the requirement to educate children is the instruction to the Israelites to talk about God's commands always, whether at home or travelling (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).  Psalm 78 reiterates the need to pass on to future generations ‘the glorious deeds of the Lord’.  This has led to creation of an educational environment as being the parent’s first responsibility to their child (Ginty, 2022).  Wolterstorff (1980, p.14) stated that ‘Christian education is education aimed at training for the Christian way of life, not just education aimed at inculcating the Christian world and life view.’  Anthony (2006, p.26) defines it as ‘the deliberate, systematic, and sustained divine and human effort to share or appropriate the knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, sensitivities, and behaviours that comprise or are consistent with the Christian faith,’ reflecting the biblical notion of Proverbs 23:7, that ‘as a man thinks in his heart, so is he’.  To be transformed into the image of Jesus involves not only spiritual formation, but also the formation and stewardship of other dimensions, such as emotions, relationships, intellect, and possessions (Chandler, 2014).  Christian education is founded on the paradigm that the knowledge of Christ as saviour transforms, so that it is not merely a knowledge exchange but that this knowledge would transform an individual and subsequently influence surrounding culture (Ginty, 2022).

Home education for religious reasons has become a significant movement amongst Christian parents because of the removal of religion from public schools in the United States (Wilhelm and Firmin, 2009).  Box (2017) called for Christians to deschool their children and ‘educate their children in life, for life’, with a discipleship emphasis to fully obey the gospel mandates of the Great Commission.  Lubienski (2003) reported that as a relatively unregulated and diverse enterprise, home education can serve as a source of innovation in the development of alternative curricula and pedagogies.  Chandler (2015) argued that although spiritual formation must remain central to any Christian education initiative if other areas of human dimensionality are neglected, it is a ‘disservice to ourselves, to those we teach, and to God’.  Hence, spiritual disciplines and faith practices are often incorporated into the curriculum of Christian education (Ginty, 2022).  Chandler (2014) offered a whole-person theology, offering a comprehensive approach to Christian education that is useful both in the academy, the church, and parachurch settings.  Lawson (2010) also expressed the importance of a holistic view of Christian education.  Within this holistic approach, issues of socialisation and individual choice are key to be aware of since some assume that home-schooling families tend to limit their child’s exposure to other ways of life in an effort to reproduce the worldviews and lifestyles of the parents onto the next generation (Lubienski, 2003).  However, Thomas (2016) revealed that rather than isolation, collaborating with professionals, other home-schooling families and community organisations is a common occurrence.  This paper therefore explores the discourses and underlying theologies surrounding the practice of Christian home education.

**Methods**

The notion of power and control in education was examined by Bizzell (1990), distinguishing between ‘coercion’ (using power regardless of consent or best interests) and ‘persuasion’ (which involves consent if all parties can see that the action is genuinely serving the best interests). Whilst Bizzell used this language to understand the dynamics between teacher and student, these concepts may be helpful for understanding the role of the state’s involvement in controlling the learning agendas of home educating families. Bizzell (1990) emphasised that for control to be used in the best interests of all parties, it is key to enter into the thinking of the other party in order that it is a collaborative enterprise. Bizzell also acknowledged the role of ‘authority,’ and that granting of authority begins with persuasion but once it has been granted, the relationship becomes less dialogic. Ultimately, Bizzell implores teachers to demonstrate links between their own experience and that of their student, to foster a collaborative and liberatory educational project which will serve all of their best interests. This theorizing and conceptualisation will be used as a framework for analysing the perceptions of Christian home educators regarding control of the learning agenda and the extent to which the state is involved.

In order to investigate the perspectives around the control of learning agendas for Christian home educators, an online survey was disseminated in July 2022 through existing home education forums and networks, culminating in 462 responses, of which 88% lived in England.  The use of an online survey enabled easy access to a sector which is often hard to reach, yet the open-ended nature of most of the questions enabled capturing of the rich and complex accounts of participants, such as participants’ subjective experiences, narratives, practices, positionings, and discourses (Braun et al., 2021).  No demographic or descriptive data was requested from the participants to assure them of the anonymity of their responses.  This paper is part of a broader project which investigated responses of Christian home educators to the ‘Schools Bill’.  The project was subject to the ethical scrutiny of ANON and therefore aspects such as informed consent, confidentiality and power relations were carefully considered.  Anonymity of all respondents seemed particularly important in this project, given the high levels of suspicion and wariness which were evident in the initial focus group and sample survey responses.

In accord with the aims of this paper, to investigate the theological perspectives presented as part of the debate about the state’s involvement in Christian home education, the responses to four questions on the online survey will be scrutinised and documented in this paper.  Firstly, ‘what led you to home education?’ and ‘how does the Schools Bill make you feel as a Christian home educator?’  These two questions were designed to illuminate the respondent’s views about home education, the Schools Bill and any interaction between the two.  These questions were deliberately open-ended, without limit on the length of responses to allow participants freedom to convey all that they wished to.  In addition, two multiple choice questions will be analysed: ‘How do you think the Schools Bill will affect Christian home education?’ and ‘What kind of understanding do you think the Department for Education (DfE) have of Christian home education?’  These closed questions provided insights in the data with focussed responses to enable clarity of participant’s positionality on these specific points (Braun, et al., 2021).

Discourse analysis was carried out on the responses to the two open-ended questions, with particular attention paid to the theological perspectives and arguments expressed within the responses.  This analysis examined the meaning given by individuals to their realities (Mulya & Aditomo, 2019) and enabled exploration of the perspectives of participants’ to be examined at three levels: (1) word level; (2) discursive level and the manner in which comments were said; and (3) social level, to understand their comments in the context of wider culture (Fairclough, 2001).  In addition, it revealed any taken-for-granted assumptions in the data (Machin and Mayr, 2012), the extent of personalisation, individualism or collectivisation in the responses (Van Leeuwen, 1996; Wisjen, 2013), and the extent of underlying beliefs (Van Dirk, 2001).  Quotes from participants’ responses are given to illustrate the link between words and analysis (Griffin and May, 2018), rather than as further grounds for generalisation. This enabled understanding beyond individuals’ attitudes and behaviours, to connecting individuals’ ways of being with larger social-cultural-political situations (Mulya & Aditomo, 2019).

**Results**

*Insights from the closed questions*

Figure 1 reveals that the majority (82%) of participants perceived that the Schools Bill would be detrimental.  Only 2% believed that it would not impact and only 0.4% felt that it would be helpful.  It is interesting to note that a significant proportion (16%) are not sure since this survey was disseminated via networks who had sought to raise awareness amongst Christian home educators of concerns surrounding the Schools Bill.  Whilst this project did not investigate what information or messages the networks had previously disseminated regarding the Schools Bill, it was presumed that participants opting to complete the survey would most likely be recruited vis these home educating networks, and hence would have been exposed to information about the Schools Bill. Yet, these survey results indicate that this proportion were unsure of the impact of the proposed Bill. This connects with 18% of participants who were not sure or felt neutral about the DfE’s understanding of Christian home education.  From reading across the qualitative responses from these participants (where they provided more information), it seems that they have similarly strong views and reasons for home educating as the other participants but all of them (except one case) seem to have experienced positive interactions with the LA, although many comment that they worry about whether this will continue in the future.  Some comment about being viewed as potential problems or ‘on the radar’ of the LA, but that if they continue to provide good education, these good LA interactions will continue.  This indicates that their general awareness from others is not positive but that their personal experiences to date have not been negative, hence their indecision to respond to these questions.  Nevertheless, in figure 2, only one percent of the participants thought that the DfE had good understanding of the issues, whilst 82% stated that it was poor or very poor.  This strong sense amongst the respondents that the Schools Bill will be detrimental and that the DfE have poor or very poor understanding of Christian home educating is an important backdrop to the next section of examining theological perspectives and discourses surrounding the reasons for home educating and their feelings about the Schools Bill.

**Figure 1: Responses to question ‘How do you think the Schools Bill will affect Christian home education?’**

**Figure 2: Responses to question ‘What kind of understanding do you think the Department for Education have of Christian home education?’**

*Insights from the open-ended question: ‘What led you to home education?’*

Responses to this question were varied and captured many responses about children having needs or personalities which were not met by mainstream school, limited choice of school, dislike of the National Curriculum, lack of individuality in the learning process in state schools, and desiring enhanced family life.  However, in accordance with the aims of this paper, the discourses related to theological reasons are analysed and discussed here.

- *Desire for Christian education*

A frequent theme was of respondents wanting to give their children a Christian education.  A small number of these caveated this by saying that they were unable to provide a Christian education through any other means, with many citing the poor availability of Christian schools or perhaps their closure and a few added comments which conveyed a slightly negative motivation, such as wanting to provide a Christian education ‘with no concerns’, or ‘with no restrictions.’  But on the whole, these responses all tended to be worded in a fairly gentle manner, always including a sense of desire, awareness of options and desired, rather than explicit need.  The language of these responses conveyed a sense of freedom and intentional choice, simultaneous to having a strong sense of what they wanted for their child’s upbringing.  Primarily these responses were about the vantage or perspective through which their child would receive their education.  A slight nuance of this were responses about the worldview they wished for their child to be raised in; expressing that they desired to provide a biblical worldview for their child, or for their child’s education to be through a ‘Christian lens,’ with a ‘solid Biblical foundation,’ or ‘guided by Biblical principles.’  One response demonstrated how this would underlie the pervading ethos, stating that they wanted their child’s identity ‘not to be based on the culture or the messages of the media, or indeed the mainstream message of being an accidental by product of a random universe, but instead to ground them in the big picture identity of being precious children of a loving God.’  This quote depicts clearly the awareness that many of the respondents had about the striking differences between world views and biblical views, and they were very keen to promote the latter.  Some exhibited a sense of integrating faith into all aspects of their child’s learning experience, for example: ‘appreciation of learning, of beautiful things, of time with one another, of the lovely things in God’s good Earth!’  This conveys the sense of wanting their child’s holistic experience to be connected with appreciation of God on a regular basis.

-  *Instilling Christian values*

Further to desiring a Christian lens for their child’s education, some respondents expressed a desire (often a ‘need’) to instil Christian values in their child.  Some described this as ‘building godly character.’  Responses of this discourse tended to be associated with negative ‘pushes’ connected with the content of state education, such as a teacher telling their child that ‘people evolved from monkeys whilst we had told him about God creating Adam and Eve’.  This distinct clash of beliefs was explained in highly emotive ways by participants, such as ‘the tipping point was…, ’ or that the curriculum was 'so far removed from the Christian ethos,’ or the ‘ungodly atmosphere in school.’  The language used indicates the strength of feeling behind these responses.  Some respondents who wanted to instil Christian values also stated that they deemed that this would not be as effective if they didn’t home educate because otherwise they would not have much time with their child.  Again, this was often expressed very emotively, such as that if they attended school ‘we’d barely see them,’ or not wanting to ‘leave my child to the care of other adults for a significant number of his waking hours.’  These responses highlight the strong personal responsibility that these parents carry to instil Christian values in their child.  Indeed, one parents stated that: ‘we are the primary disciplers of our children and so wanted to have the greatest input into their lives.’  This conveys a highly intentional and strategic response to parenting and education.  This notion is further depicted by the statement: ‘we wanted to follow God’s Word when He says, 'Train up a child in the way they should go'.

- *A sense of calling*

Building upon a sense of wanting or needing to instil Christian values in their children, some respondents conveyed a sense of calling from God as a reason for home educating their child.  However, they did not explain this any further, simply stated: ‘God called us to it.’  This conveys the sense of fundamental acceptance and steadfastness about their reason for home educating.  A slight nuance of this was ‘the leading of God,’ and ‘personal conviction.’  Other expressions of this notion were: ‘we were aware that our children are our responsibility in God's eyes, and home educating would enable us to provide a safe and caring environment in which our children could grow and learn,’ which reveals a sense of these parents feeling full responsibility to raise their children, rather than to turn to state schools.  Indeed, one stated that ‘parents are the primary teachers for their children,’ again revealing that these families view parents as their main influences and teachers.  Many in fact reported this as a ‘duty’ of Christian parents, with some using language such as ‘godly instruction,’ ‘being in line with biblical principles’ and a ‘strong biblical mandate.  Those expressing these discourses surrounding a sense of calling tended to be expressed in a harder and more rigid tone and seemed to imply lack of choice or options on the part of the parent respondent.  However, some reported it as a combination, such as ‘dissatisfaction with the school system led to a conviction from the Lord that home educating was what he was calling us to do.’  This is therefore a different thrust to earlier responses which conveyed that the calling of God was the initial prompt for home educating.  A slightly different emphasis to this were those participants who reported being led rather than called, such as ‘we felt prayerfully led to home ed.’

-  *Removal from toxic environment*

Many of the participants described mainstream schools as a toxic environment, such as one who described circle time as witchcraft and stated that there was use of psychological techniques to achieve children’s exam success, and a sense of teachers being stifled, with this all being ‘at the expense of real education.’  Others described feeling concerned as to what their children would be exposed to in mainstream education, with comments such as ‘infiltration of grooming in schools and potential health/medical violations under the Gillick competence test,’ and ‘we didn't want evolution/witchcraft themes/humanism floated on our kids.’  This discourse of the state schools being perceived as an unhealthy or unwholesome place for children was very prevalent, and was stated very forcibly and factually, with no hesitation or notion of it being an opinion.  Flowing from this, some stated that they home educated their child to protect them from things that don’t align with the Christian worldview, from ‘harmful moral teaching in their early years,’ ‘ungodly teachings in public schools’ or ‘from the political, indoctrination and miss information that is taught in school.’   One extreme case stated their reasoning as being: ‘the satanic/paedophile influence in schools today, it's diabolical and harmful. There is also too much political nonsense being taught via brainwashing. Our family values are being crushed.’  Although this is an exception in being so extreme, this excerpt shows the strength of feeling for many of these families about the unsafe environment of the school system.  Some were more balanced and indicated that they wouldn’t necessarily have chosen this but felt that it was the only option since they did not wish to compromise their faith: ‘whilst I want him to have a rounded education, I don't want him to be taught with ideology that is contrary to the Bible.’  Indeed, others spoke of a feeling that their faith and Christian values were not protected or supported within the state school system, such as: ‘I wanted an education for my children where the Bible would be included and celebrated, instead of being attacked and ridiculed.’

-  *Combined causes*

For some participants, faith was a supplementary reason, such as one parent who detailed educational and relational issues and then wrote ‘And faith.’  This short statement indicates that it is a non-negotiable statement and does not require further explanation or justification, and also that it is a simple added reason to the primary causes.  In contrast to this, some participants listed a faith reason first such as ‘God called us to it,’ and then followed this with other reasons about their child’s specific or individual needs.  Nevertheless, in the majority of responses there were mixed responses of faith or other reasons provided, revealing the complexity and multi-faceted nature of these choices and situations.

*Insights from the open-ended question: ‘How does the Schools Bill make you feel as a Christian home educator’*

-  *Concern*

There were very strong emotions expressed in the responses: sad, angry, worried, nervous, anxious or concerned.  In many cases the respondents merely listed these emotions in single word answers, perhaps indicating the strength of feeling.  Frequently respondents connected these feelings with the future, so that participants stated that they did not feel worried now, but that they were worried for the future.  There was worry about what the future implications may be of the Schools Bill and a sense that the input from the government may be developed in the future to make the situation even more difficult for home educators.  Many offered further insights into these feelings, with some developing their answers to explain feeling ‘under attack,’ ‘alarmed,’ ‘threatened,’ ‘intimidated’ or had ‘fear of persecution’ for their religious beliefs and values.  Some expressed the same sentiment but in a less strong way: ‘no respect for my values and beliefs,’ or ‘marginalised,’ judged’, and that it ‘detracts from our family values.’

-  *Loss of freedom*

A frequent discourse was about the loss of freedom for Christian home educators stemming from the Schools Bill, and a sense that this was undermining their responsibility as parents of their own children.  Many of these comments were connected with their theological principles of being a Christian parent and taking those responsibilities seriously.  The phrases used were ‘loss of freedom,’ ‘restricted,’ ‘not much control,’ ‘excessive monitoring,’ ‘inhibits our choices,’ ‘no ability to cater for the individual,’ and ‘not able to feel freedom as a home educator.’  A few stated that they felt ‘under suspicion.’  There were many comments about the state ‘over-reaching,’ and the Schools Bill being ‘external interference’ in home education, and undermining the responsibilities and freedoms of parents to educate their own children in the way they deem best, and in accordance with the child’s individual needs.  Many spoke of ‘our children,’ and emphasised that they were not the state’s, with one asserting that the government were behaving as if ‘the state owns our children,’ conveying that this issue was beyond merely loss of freedom but about responsibility, ownership and control, with family’s day to day lives ‘violated’.  A couple of strong opinions were that the state was wanting to ‘indoctrinate all children with the same beliefs’ and that the Schools Bill was tantamount to a ‘propaganda agenda for children to learn specific things’ which were the selection and choice of the UK government.  There were some concerns associated here with the accountability of the government with regard to these decisions.

-  *Loss of voice*

There were strong discourses of loss of voice, often expressed as feeling weak, such as: ‘feeling powerless to have a voice,’ revealing the perception of the government domineering or misusing their position of power to inhibit the voice of Christian home educators.  Others expressed this as being ‘unheard,’ ‘ignored’ or ‘misunderstood’ and felt that their ‘views were not being taken into account.’  Often this discourse was associated with a lack of fairness, shown by comments such as ‘discriminated against,’ ‘powerless because of the assumptions they have jumped to,’ ‘not treated equally to state education,’ and that it ‘goes against our human rights and democracy.’  Other responses conveyed feeling ‘devalued’ or ‘side-lined,’ with some expressing a lack of trust from the government about their ability to care for and educate their *own* children.  Some stated that they felt ‘vilified’ and made to feel ‘guilty until we can prove our innocence.’

**Discussion**

The online survey responses have revealed a plethora of discourses and perspectives around the control of classroom agendas for Christian home educators, and the theological perspectives and socio-cultural contexts which are associated.  The reasons and motivations given by these participants for home educating are inextricably linked with their underpinning theological ideas.  There was a strong underlying expression in the responses of the biblical notion of parenting responsibilities being to incorporate educating children with Christian values and beliefs, echoing the notion of a Christian educational environment being the parent’s first responsibility to their child to intentionally provide a Christian worldview as part of daily life (Wolterstorff, 1980; Anthony, 2006; Ginty, 2022).  It is this deeply held conviction and responsibility which is the strongest clash with the notion of the Schools Bill, as the survey participants question the state’s involvement and control over their child’s education, since they deem that Christian parents are primarily responsible for the education of their child.  This problematises any external authority in dictating curriculum content, teaching methods or frameworks to families who have opted to educate their children outside of the mainstream school system. This indicated failure to fully comprehend this situation from the perspective of Christian home educators, which would be required for effective persuasion to occur (Bizzell, 1990).  This connects with the difference between public and private space, since the phenomenon of home educating is essentially an intentional decision to operate with an individualised or privatised focus (Lubienski, 2003).  Respondents in this study expressed that they believe the Schools Bill is at odds with these freedoms and indeed seeks to force control over the home educating agenda, when EHE is at the core the idea of providing an individualised and personalised education for the child, designed and controlled by the home environment.  Home educating families have always consciously rejected interference from, and accountability to, any external authorities (Reich, 2002) since they see the direction of their children’s schooling as a matter properly under their control and no one else’s, with no intermediary between them and their child’.  Input of the government into the functioning of home educating is therefore a distinct shift in this existing paradigm and conflicts with the Christian beliefs of the parents as primary educators of their child. Alongside this entrenched way of thinking, it seems that the Christian home educators perceive that the government is seeking to coerce or exert authority rather than persuade or collaborate with home educating families (Bizzell, 1990). In relation to this, further research to explore how the wider Christian population perceives or regards these Christian home educators would be beneficial to understand this further.

The survey participants seem particularly concerned about consequent limitations and restrictions on their ability to teach their child Christian values and beliefs, which Osiek (1996) and Knowles (2009) ultimately believe enable these children to function as valuable members of society, hence are beneficial to wider society also.  Yet van der Tol and Gorski (2022) problematise the phenomenon of normative exclusions of religious symbols from public spaces, so it follows that attempting to exclude religion from private spaces such as the home educating environment is even more problematic.  The main issue behind this concern is that the exclusion of religious beliefs and symbols indicates a refusal to entertain particular identities as part of the common story and results in sustainable coexistence being at risk (van der Tol & Gorski, 2022). Secularisation inevitably points to the abandonment of religious modes of thinking in preference to reason and science (Shorten, 2010). This conflicts greatly with the sense of calling which the participants articulated as driving their desire to educate their child within the parameters of Christian values and beliefs.  The strong motivation to instil these values and practices in their children reflects biblical teachings and instructions to parents to pass this on within daily family life (Thompson, 1996; Strohl, 2001; Turner, 2010).

Another strong issue highlighted by the survey participants is the lack of dialogue surrounding this shift in protocol and proposed legislation, causing respondents to feel ostracised, marginalised and lacking a voice within this changing framework and parameters.  This is compounded by the fact that survey respondents overwhelmingly stated that the DfE has a distinct lack of understanding of Christian home education, which Bizzell (1990) emphasised was required for effective collaboration to occur.  Indeed, Shorten (2010) expressed concern over the formation of belief systems which decontest the centrality and meaning of one’s core commitments by generating pre-rational attachments and selectively tapping into local religious traditions. Such selective acceptance of values and beliefs is hence problematic. Namely, the distinctive nature of a democratic society is effort to enhance participation and involvement, and reduce discrimination and marginalisation within policy formation (Bochel et al., 2008).  Bizzell (1991) asserted that persuasion must precede authority, as that is what distinguishes authority in a crucial way from coercion.  But the intention of the Schools Bill to establish some form of control into the classroom agenda of home educators does not seem to have included any elements of collaboration or persuasion, which has caused the participants to feel mistrusted, devalued and side-lined and has heightened their sense of suspicion and concern about authority.  Indeed, Bizzell (1991) highlighted the importance of wielding authority gently and in dialogue, which is not how the participants have perceived the formation of the Schools Bill.  Furthermore, participants conveyed a deep concern and suspicion of the toxicity and unwholesomeness of the endeavours of state schools, which they believe are at times conflicting with Christian values and beliefs.  These concerns have become heightened due to the introduction of the Schools Bill and seem to have had the effect of widening the chasm between home educators and mainstream schools.

**Conclusion**

The underlying beliefs of these Christian parents that they are primarily responsible for educating their child within a Christian framework is theologically underpinned by biblical teachings.  Attempts of the state to control this educational agenda by coercion therefore conflicts substantially with their sense of calling and fundamental religious beliefs. The implications of this however, are not simply restricted to the Christian example. Christian home education and the reach of the Schools Bill throw into relief wider questions of parental rights and the reach of state authority in pluralistic society. Responses from the Christian example illustrates how national schooling may be perceived as ignoring or even contradicting the religious duties of families of faith. The main illustrative example of this in the UK, thus far, been protests raised by Muslim families about school practices and curricula. The widening of this group to Christian families, and its particular highlighting through the instrument of the Schools Bill, shows that there are bigger societal questions, not just about how education responds to minority needs, but how education responds to all needs in pluralistic society. Whilst there is a clear imperative here for greater dialogue between Christian, churches, local authorities and policy makers, there is also a need for improved understanding of Christian faith, educational alternatives and the interactions of state and parents in matters that concern children and education. However, there is also an opportunity to begin wider public and policy conversations about how, in general, religious freedom, religious diversity, education and the State interact (Pattison and Holmes under review).

**Acknowledgements**

We are appreciative of these organisations for disseminating our research invitation: CHESS, Christian Education Teach, Christian Home Ed UK, Christian Education (UK and Europe), Classical Conversations.  Thanks also to Bonnie Smith for carrying out the data analysis.

**References**

Association of Directors of Children’s Services (2021).  *Elective Home Education Survey*,<https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_EHE_Survey_2021_Report_FINAL.pdf>

Anthony M. J. (Ed) (2001). *Introducing Christian education: Foundations for the twenty-first century* (pp. 13–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Asbridge, N. (2009). What is a child, in Richards, A. & Privett, P. (eds.) *Through the eyes of a child: New insights in theology from a child’s perspective.* London: Church House Publishing, pp.1-20.

Elizabeth Bartholet, *Homeschooling: Parent Rights Absolutism vs. Child Rights to Education & Protection*, 62 ARIZ. L. REV. 1 (2020).

Berne, E. (1972). *What Do You Say After You Say Hello? The Psychology of Human Destiny.* New York: Grove Press.

Bizzell, P., 1991. Classroom authority and critical pedagogy. *American Literary History*, *3*(4), pp.847-863.

Blok, H. and Karsten, S., 2011. Inspection of home education in European countries. *European journal of education*, *46*(1), pp.138-152.

Box, L.A., 2017. God doesn't want you to send your children to school: He wants them have an education.<https://www.academia.edu/download/56167619/20170427L07.pdf>

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L. and McEvoy, C., 2021. The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *24*(6), pp.641-654.

Bunge, M.J. (2008). ‘Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and ‘Best Practices' for Faith Formation: Resources for Child, Youth, and Family Ministry Today’ *Dialog*, 47(4), pp.348-360.

Cavalletti, S. (1983). Religious Potential of the Child. Ramsey: Paulist Press. (translated by Coulter, P.M. & Coulter, J.M.)

Chandler, D. J. (2014). *Christian spiritual formation: An integrated approach to personal and relational wholeness*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic.

Chandler, D.J., 2015. Whole-person formation: An integrative approach to Christian education. *Christian Education Journal*, *12*(2), pp.314-332.

Englund, T., 2006. Jürgen Habermas and education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *38*(5), pp.499-501.

Fairclough, N., 2001. Critical discourse analysis as a method in social scientific research. *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, *5*(11), pp.121-138.

Fensham-Smith, A.J., 2021. Invisible pedagogies in home education: Freedom, power and control. *Journal of Pedagogy*, *12*(1), pp.5-27.

Fishburn, J., 1983. The family as a means of grace in American theology. *Religious Education*, *78*(1), pp.90-102.

Ginty, B.L., 2022. Organizational Original Design: Parental Responsibility for Christian Education and Faith Development in the Home. *Journal of Organizational & Educational Leadership*, *8*(1), p.2.

Griffin, A. and May, V. (2018) ‘Narrative Analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis’, in C. Seale (ed.) *Researching Society and Culture*. London: Sage, pp. 511–532.

Harris, J.R. (1998). *The Nurture Assumption: Why children turn out the way they do – Parents matter less than you think and peers matter more.* New York: The Free Press.

Hart, T. (2003). *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*. California: New World Library.

Pattison, H. & Holmes, S.E. (under review) Whose children are they? Using Kymlicka on multicultralism to evaluate rights and freedom in Christian Home Education.

Knowles, G. (2009). *Ensuring Every Child Matters.* London: Sage Publications.

Lees, H., & Nicholson, F. (2017).  Home education in the United Kingdom. In: M. Gaither (Ed.). *The Wiley handbook of home education* (pp. 303-328). London: John Wiley & Son, Inc

Lubienski, C., 2003. A critical view of home education. *Evaluation & Research in Education*, *17*(2-3), pp.167-178.

Machin, D. & Mayr, A. (2012).  *How to do critical discourse analysis*, London: Sage.

Maas, R. (2000). ‘Christ as the logos of childhood: Reflections on the meaning and mission of the child’, *Theology Today*, 56(4), pp.456-468.

Mulya, T. & Aditomo, A., 2019. Researching religious tolerance education using discourse analysis: a case study from Indonesia. *British Journal of religious education*, *41*(4), pp.446-457.

Mitchell, E. (2020), Why English parents choose home education – a study, *Education* 3-13.

Modood, T. and Sealy, T., 2022. Developing a framework for a global comparative analysis of the governance of religious diversity. *Religion, State & Society*, pp.1-16.

Purcell, C., Baginsky, M., Manthorpe, J., & Driscoll, J. (2023). ‘Home Education in England: A Loose Thread in the Child Safeguarding Net?’ *Social Policy and Society*, 42, 1, 1-12.

Rothermel, P. (Ed.). (2015). *International perspectives on home-education: Do We Still Need Schools?* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shorten, R., 2010. Political Theology, Political Religion and Secularisation. *Political Studies Review*, *8*(2), pp.180-191.

Strohl, J.E. (2001). The Child in Luther’s Theology, in Bunge, M, (ed.), The Child in Christian Thought. Cambridge: William B Eerdmans, pp.134-159.

Surr, J. (2011). ‘Links between early attachment experiences and manifestations of spirituality’, *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, 16(2), pp.129-141.

Terry, P.R., 1997. Habermas and education: Knowledge, communication, discourse. *Curriculum Studies*, *5*(3), pp.269-279.

Thomas, J., 2016. Learning from homeschooling routines. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, *25*(3), pp.233-250.

Thompson, M. (1996). *Family as the forming centre: A vision of the role of family in spiritual formation*. Nashville: Upper Room Books.

Underdown, A. (2007). *Young Children’s Health and Well-being*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

van der Tol, M. and Gorski, P., 2022. Secularisation as the fragmentation of the sacred and of sacred space. *Religion, State & Society*, pp.1-18.

Van Dijk, T. (2001).  ‘Multidisciplinary CDA: A pleas for diversity’, in Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (eds), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis,* London: Sage, pp.95-120.

Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). ‘The representations of social actors’, in Caldas-Coulthad, C.R. & Coulthard, M. (eds), *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis,* London: Routledge, pp.32-70.

Westerhoff, J. (1980). *Bringing up children in the Christian faith*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Wilhelm, G.M. and Firmin, M.W., 2009. Historical and contemporary developments in home school education. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, *18*(3), pp.303-315.

Wijsen, F. (2013) ‘There are radical Muslims and normal Muslims’: an analysis of the discourse on Islamic extremism, *Religion, 43*:1, 70-88.

Wolterstorff, N. P. (1980). *Educating for responsible action*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Worsley, H. (2010). ‘The Bible in the family context’, in *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, 15(2), pp.115-127.

1. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/7> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-bill-policy-statements> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://goodlawproject.org/news/schools-bill-attack-home-schooling/>,<https://notfineinschool.co.uk/the-schools-bill-2022-1>,<https://pressat.co.uk/releases/home-educating-families-are-horrified-at-the-first-reading-of-the-schools-bill-35c400a743d866ea946c7ed590635393/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://ourmuslimhomeschool.com/2022/06/the-new-schools-bill-home-education.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [The schools bill: This state power grab threatens home education and should be resisted by all Christians | Opinion | Premier Christianity](https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/the-schools-bill-this-state-power-grab-threatens-home-education-and-should-be-resisted-by-all-christians/13273.article) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)