

Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarships Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies (PIRS) University of Southampton

RECRUITMENT CYCLE for studentships starting: October 2025 (Cohort 2)

SUPERVISORY TEAM

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STUDENTSHIP PROJECT TITLE

Rupture and resilience in post-pandemic education: rebuilding and reframing positive experiences of learning through the home education of neurodivergent children

OVERVIEW

The Covid pandemic ruptured the longstanding relationship between schools and families, with many children and young people, especially those who are neurodivergent, struggling with attendance or choosing to withdraw from formal education. This project will explore how young people and families reframe, rebuild, and re-engage with learning through home education.

SUMMARY

This project will explore the lived experiences of home educating parents, families, and young people through a collaboration between the Autism Community Research

Network@Southampton [ACoRNS], home-education communities, and Philosophy. ACoRNS is an award-winning partnership between Education and Psychology researchers and local education providers, which develops and applies participatory approaches and creative methods to enable and promote the voices of typically marginalised groups. The extension of our collaboration to include Philosophy offers an exciting academic environment in which to pursue a novel synthesis of ideas to an important but under-researched context. The successful applicant will benefit from rich, interdisciplinary supervision as well as weekly term-time ACoRNS meetings which provide a stimulating, safe and constructive space for sharing research, and developing skills and knowledge.

This project will require building sustained relationships with home-educating families to gain authentic insights into their experiences. ACoRNS has existing links with members of the home education community who are keen to support the participation and representation of diverse views and experiences. Many families have children with neurodivergent profiles (including autism) and so experience and understanding of young people with these profiles will be important. The project will use a creative, participatory, qualitative methodology to enable a range of views to be heard and shared. Such views offer unique and rare insights into educational practices and experiences that are largely unreported and unseen. In the new, post-pandemic educational landscape this project offers an exciting, innovative, and potentially impactful opportunity to contribute to knowledge and practice.

PROJECT CONCEPT

Rationale

Historically, home education has tended to be positioned and understood as a niche, ideological choice for families who did not wish for their children to attend formal education. Pre-pandemic, the experiences of families with children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) had begun to signal that home education was not a choice for many but instead a forced decision due to a failure to adequately meet children's needs in school (Parsons & Lewis, 2010; Smith & Nelson, 2015). Post-pandemic, there has been a substantial increase in children struggling to attend school more generally (Gunter & Makinson, 2023), with the number of children (c.140,000) in home education around 80 per cent higher than in 2018-19 and doubling between 2021-22 and 2022-23 (Whittaker, 2024). Survey data from parents in the UK shows that both pre-pandemic (Totsika et al., 2020) and post-pandemic (Connolly et al., 2023), children and young people with neurodivergent profiles, especially autism, are overrepresented in those experiencing difficulties with school attendance.

This substantial increase in the numbers of children being home educated (especially those who are neurodivergent) is shaping radical changes in how, where and by whom teaching and learning takes place. Anecdotally, we know that there can be considerable positive benefits of home-education for families who feel that schools do

not provide a safe or supportive environment that adequately meets their children's needs, and that there are also substantial practical, emotional, and financial challenges for families in becoming home-educators. However, home education is substantially under-researched, and many (often) negative assumptions and stereotypes prevail, including that children are socially isolated, not encouraged to spend time in meaningful activities, or being adequately prepared for future learning, training, and employment.

The views and experiences of home-educating families, including children, are rarely heard in challenging these negative views, and this project will provide such a space to enable rare and impactful insights into this more liminal educational context. Indeed, in conversations with home-educators we hear how young people's experiences of state education were toxic and exclusionary and that their engagement with learning can be transformed through education which provides a more nurturing, tailored, and individualised approach. Additionally, many (most) home educators are women and so there are also wider questions to be asked about the highly gendered impact of failures of the education system to meet children's needs, including being forced to withdraw from the workforce to support their children's education.

We draw upon the core concept of neurodiversity to frame this project, which positions autism (and other neurodivergent conditions) as a neurological difference rather than disorder, placing an emphasis on taking a strengths-based (rather than deficit-focused) approach to supporting individuals. This emphasis places the locus of responsibility for promoting resilience within the environment of individuals (places, people, attitudes, and flexible approaches), while also seeking to understand what might be the 'best fit' between an individual and that environment i.e. autism + environment = outcome (Beardon, 2017).

Objectives

The objectives of the project are to:

- Explore the lived experiences of home educating families with neurodivergent children including: reasons for not participating in formal education; processes for re-imagining and re-engaging with learning; and who is engaged in the work of home education
- Apply a range of creative methods for enabling the contribution of diverse views and perspectives to our understanding of those lived experiences
- Explore, critically apply and synthesise core concepts from Education, Psychology and Philosophy on learner resilience, capacities and strengths in the context of home education
- Provide a critical lens on thinking about education and where, how and by whom teaching and learning takes place

Methods

ACoRNS works in partnership with education (and other) providers in the community. In this case, we have established excellent links with a home-education co-operative that is very keen to collaborate with us in research. Their support is vital since home

educators have reported in the past feeling excluded from educational research and suspicious of research agendas that may seek to undermine them. The plans for this research will therefore be co-constructed with the home-education group to ensure the methods and questions are appropriate, respectful and feasible. Knowledge co-construction is also central to our endeavours to actively challenge epistemic injustice within research that traditionally tends to exclude, overlook, or only tokenistically include, the voices of marginalised groups. The project will draw on a range of creative methods to support children, young people and families to share their views and lived experiences. The ACoRNS team has extensive experience of developing and applying methods when working with a diverse range of children and young people including body mapping, digital storytelling, storyboards, and photovoice.

Wider implications

Many commentators have suggested that post-pandemic there has been a rupture in the traditional relationships between home and school with physical attendance no longer prioritised or seen as the only option. Consequently, there is a significant social change occurring in real time in terms of attitudes towards and lived experiences of different ways of providing education. It is important to capture something about these rapidly changing circumstances and experiences as they occur, however very little is known about what is happening within home-educating contexts, and the ways in which young people are encouraged to re-engage with learning. Most crucially, the views of home-educated children and young people are almost entirely absent from any research on this topic. Consequently, the wider implications of this project could be to provide insights into a reimagining of educational provision based on a deeply contextualised understanding of how environments, relationships, and pedagogic approaches intersect to create resilient conditions for learning for neurodivergent young people.

Contribution to interdisciplinary resilience studies:

Vella and Pai (2019) summarise the decades of resilience research in the context of human psychological flourishing and note that while there are many differing definitions of resilience, they all fundamentally describe factors, traits, or processes that require an individual to ‘bounce back’ (p.233) (have a positive outcome) after experiencing adversity. More recent research has recognised resilience as a ‘dynamic interactive process’ whereby ‘...individuals will demonstrate differing degrees of resilience within different contexts’ (Vella & Pai, p.235). This recognition is important for the current study since we draw upon the core, strengths-based concept of neurodiversity to explore what the processes of resilience may be for neurodivergent young people who have experienced adversity within mainstream educational settings, and how they describe what enabling environments need to be like to support positive outcomes.

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Supervisor-led Studentship Project Concept

Our novel approach seeks to incorporate a *capacities-first* framework from Philosophy in understanding more about how home-education may enable the cognitive capacities of neurodivergent young people. This framework takes it as a datum that there is diversity in cognitive capacities and cognitive flourishing and suggests organizing normative theories around this datum. The framework encourages an inversion of traditional ways of thinking about the goals of education and educational assessment. Rather than assessing learners for how well they meet targets defined independently of their capacities, it recommends assessing educational practices for how well they engage and develop learners' capacities, taken on their own terms. The framework makes good sense of the value of home education.

Please list and describe any specific/additional technical training or support to undertake and successfully deliver this project. *Note that students recruited into this programme will undertake a bespoke training curriculum. Students and their supervisory teams will also identify generic skills gaps to address through training courses offered by the University's Doctoral College.*

- Creative, arts-based methods and participatory (qualitative) methodologies
- Multi-modal analysis
- We offer weekly (term-time) ACoRNS meetings which provide research training and peer support for sharing and discussing autism research and practice. We would expect the successful applicant to be a part of the group and attend regularly.