

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Home-schooling in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract

Internationally, there continues to be a rise in the popularity of home-schooling. Although the growth in the numbers of families choosing this alternative approach was evident prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic school closures, it appears to have impacted on the decision for some to home-school permanently. Using a scoping review of the literature, this paper considers the research evidence around home-schooling in the United Kingdom and Europe. It then focuses on home-schooling in the Republic of Ireland to assess the change and development of home-schooling over time. In line with trends internationally, Irish administrative data show an increase in the numbers of families engaging in home-schooling in recent years, particularly for students with disabilities. The paper situates these findings within the context of ongoing debates on inclusive and special education in Ireland and the capacity of mainstream schools to educate and include every student.

KEYWORDS

disability, exclusion, home education, home-school, implementation, inclusion, parents, Ireland

Key points

- Research evidence on home-schooling shows an expansion in this type of educational provision across the United Kingdom and Europe in recent years.
- Using administrative data from Ireland, the paper shows an increase in home-schooling in recent years overall, particularly for students with disabilities. There are some differences by gender, with more boys than girls being home-schooled each year.
- Given ongoing debates around special education provision and systems of inclusive education, the paper argues for further research on reasons for the increase in the numbers choosing or being forced to home-school.
- The paper suggests the need to re-examine mainstream education and school exclusion for some students. Specific attention should be paid to the reasons why some students with disabilities have moved from mainstream education to home-schooling.

INTRODUCTION

Home-schooling has become increasingly popular over the past two decades; across the world, countries are reporting increases in the number of children

and young people being home-schooled (English & Gribble, 2021). Home-schooling is defined as the education of children within the home setting, independent of the formal schooling context. It is usually overseen by parents (Harding & Farrell, 2003) and

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generally takes two different forms, namely, structured home-schooling, where parents and children work to a set curriculum, and unstructured home-schooling (or unschooling) where learning occurs throughout the day without predetermined subjects or a curriculum (Neuman & Guterman, 2017). The language around home-schooling or home education is complex but generally, home-schoolers are those who seek to replicate modern schooling at home compared to home educators who consider education in all forms and view all experiences as educational (Oldham, 2021). From a policy perspective, home-schooling is not universally recognised as a legal option for children and young people (Chinazzi, 2021), and countries across Europe and internationally vary widely in how they respond to children and young people who, for whatever reason, are educated at home.

Alongside the expansion of this form of educational provision, research on home-schooling has developed in most regions over the past decade. While the number of empirical research studies and discussion papers on home-schooling has grown, much of its focus has been on motivations for home-schooling with less emphasis on the actual implementation and practice, with the noticeable exception of Bongrand (2019), D'Arcy (2014) and Jones (2013). Though a greater understanding of motivations is important, a stronger emphasis on the practice and implementation of home-schooling for families choosing this form of education is warranted. Through a scoping review of the literature, this article initially explores the implementation and practice of home-schooling in the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe. Using policy documents and administrative data, it subsequently focuses on the change and development of home-schooling over time in Ireland compared to its European counterparts. This article seeks to situate trends in the uptake of home-schooling within the context of ongoing tensions and debates on special and inclusive education globally.

A scoping review was adopted to examine the literature on home-schooling in the UK and Europe and to synthesise the evidence. Sources included primary research, reviews and non-empirical studies, which allowed the authors to identify and analyse the breadth of evidence available on home-schooling (Munn et al., 2022). Multiple data sources were used in the analysis of home-schooling in Ireland, including relevant literature on home-schooling, policy documents specifically referencing home-schooling and home-school administrative data obtained from Tusla, Ireland's Child and Family Agency. This article focuses solely on home-schooling families registered with Tusla as distinct from families using the Home Tuition Service run by the Irish Department of Education for children with disabilities (Department of Education, 2022).

HOME-SCHOOLING AND NATIONAL REGULATIONS

Across Europe, countries differ in the legality and implementation of home-schooling. Some countries allow home-schooling without regulations or restrictions, while in other countries home-schooling is completely illegal (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). For example, compulsory school attendance is required by law in Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. In Germany, there have been a number of legal cases where families have sought to challenge the ban on home education, with no success (Monk, 2009). In other countries – such as the UK, France, Austria, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Ireland – however, home-schooling is permitted by law and has seen a growth in uptake in recent years. Figure 1 maps the regulation of home-schooling across Europe in primary and lower secondary and highlights how in the majority of countries, home education is at the request of parents and families with authorisation given at the local authority level or central government (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). In 13 of the countries, authorisation is only granted in exceptional circumstances, such as for medical or health reasons. In most countries, student progress is monitored and assessed by the relevant authority although no such regulation exists in the UK or the Netherlands (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018).

The legal position of home education or elective home education (EHE) is the topic of much debate in UK home-schooling literature as the number of children and young people being home educated continues to increase (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2018; Lees & Nicholson, 2017). In England, the Education Act states that parents are duty-bound to ensure that their child is educated, but they are not legally obliged to send their child to school. The relatively recent survey (2017–2018) showed a dramatic increase in the number of children being home-schooled, with just under 80,000 children in England now estimated to be educated this way (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2018). In some countries, there are specific limitations on home-schooling. For example, in Greece, home-schooling is only allowed in the case of children with disabilities, and the law specifies that where education takes place at home it must be directly supervised by a school (Home School Legal Defence Association, 2022).

HOME-SCHOOL MONITORING

Where regulation does exist, research highlights various problems in the monitoring of home-schooling across different national contexts. In England,

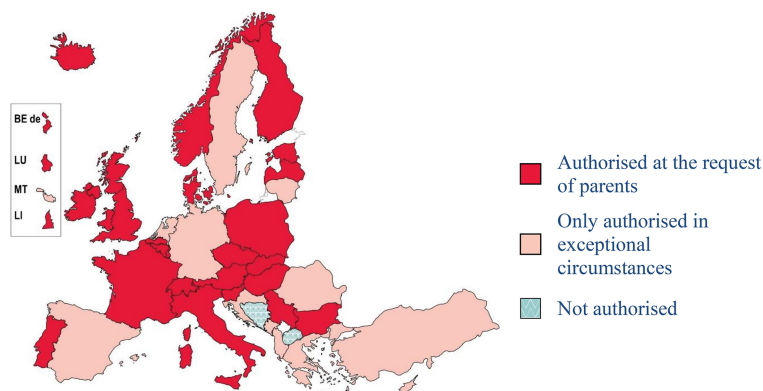


FIGURE 1 National legislation on home education during primary and lower secondary education, 2018–2019. *Source:* European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2018).

problems have arisen with elective home education, with varying practices across different local authorities regarding the frequency of visits and what these visits should include (D'Arcy, 2014). Many of the issues around home-schooling were raised by the landmark Badman Report (2009), which evaluated the UK system of home education and made recommendations to improve it (Badman, 2009). A key aspect of this controversial review was the recommendation to make national registration compulsory for home-schooling parents and give local authority officers the right to inspect and monitor home education. In other countries, monitoring is referred to in national legislation and is generally undertaken by local authorities. There is, however, little research or understanding of what frequency or form home-schooling monitoring should take. In Norway, for example, the Education Act specifies that the quality of home education should be the same as that of public education and should be evaluated by local municipalities (Havik & Magne Ingul, 2022). In France, inspections are carried out once a year by the academy inspector, who checks that the child is receiving a common core of knowledge, skills and culture (Service-Public-FR, 2022).

MOTIVATIONS FOR HOME-SCHOOLING

One of the most notable features of home-schooling research is perhaps the extent to which it is generally overlooked as a form of provision in educational research. Considering recent extant debates on inclusive education, educational inequality and specifically school exclusion, home-schooling has received little attention. This gap in home-schooling research is arguably most notable for students with disabilities, given research that shows more negative experiences of mainstream education among these students (Goodall, 2018; McCoy & Banks, 2012; Williams et al., 2018). The role of home-schooling as part

of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic's school closures and periods of emergency home education around the world has drawn much-needed attention to a practice that has been growing in popularity over the past decade (Dobosz et al., 2023; Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020). Whilst this has led to an increase in the number of families choosing to home-school, research suggests the pandemic's impact is minimal and most children have returned to their previous mainstream school (Children's Commissioner (UK), 2020).

Research on home-schooling tends to focus on several key areas, including the motivations for home-schooling and the characteristics of the parents and their children who home-school. The reasons or motives for home-schooling have classified families into two key groups: 'elective' and 'second-choice' home-schoolers (Forlin & Chambers, 2023). Elective home-schooling is generally based on an ideology where parents home-school their children because of ideals or religion, or because of a distinct educational philosophy (Rothermel, 2005). Research on elective home-schooling has sought to define home-schoolers and challenge the stereotype that exists (Bongrand, 2019; Rothermel, 2005), with the understanding that they are not a homogenous group and vary as much as a typical public or mainstream school family, making it impossible to generalise the range of demographics, philosophies and practices (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020).

An alternative approach to viewing home education is what is classified as the second-choice approach. There is increasing recognition in the research that not all home-schooling is elective or based on choice but is instead an option for people who feel they have no secure or safe alternative for their children (Parsons & Lewis, 2010). For some students, home-schooling is seen as a response to problems at school, such as bullying, a child's unhappiness or a lack of adequate support for students with disabilities (Badman, 2009). Much of the research around second-choice home-schooling focuses specifically on home-schooling for students with disabilities or special educational needs

(Kendall & Taylor, 2016; Maxwell et al., 2020), including gifted children (Jolly & Mathews, 2012). These studies highlight the extent to which push factors (Parsons & Lewis, 2010) from the school influence the decision to home-school.

An early study by Parsons and Lewis (2010) found, through an online survey, that parents' decisions were predominantly influenced by their children's individual needs not being met by the school as well as concerns issues around how teaching and learning were approached. They highlighted the issue of around the use of the term 'choice' when discussing home-schooling for this group of students and argued that these parents' decisions were 'reached only after periods of substantial unhappiness and with significant personal, familial and financial sacrifices' (Parsons & Lewis, 2010, p. 83).

More recent research in Wales by Maxwell et al. (2020) similarly examined the decision to home-school made by parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities and found that one-third of parents home-schooled because of negative experiences with their child's schooling. This included negative interactions with their child's school around assessment, attainment or the level of support being received. Furthermore, Kendall and Taylor's (2016) small-scale English study also highlighted the extent to which parents' decision to home-school resulted from negative engagement with their child's school (Kendall & Taylor, 2016). Their study revealed issues such as a lack of understanding on the part of school staff around disabilities like autism, a failure to engage with them as parents and a non-receptive school environment more generally. They emphasised how the decline in their child's health and well-being was a contributing factor in their decision (Kendall & Taylor, 2016).

In Italy, Chinazzi (2021) argues that parents are often influenced by the school environment and academic preparation for students with disabilities or those that required one-to-one or tailored instruction (Chinazzi, 2021). Her research shows that it was primarily parents' dissatisfaction with their child's schools that influenced the decision to home-school (Chinazzi, 2021). She described how this group of parents view home education as a last resort born from frustration from their experiences with conventional schools.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL APPROACHES TO HOME-SCHOOLING

Compared to the extant research published on motivations for home-schooling across Europe, research on the implementation and practice of home-schooling is limited. The studies that exist tend to be qualitative

and small in scale. They do, however, offer some important insights into what home education can look like as a practice and what factors influence successful home-schooling. Research often distinguishes between home-schooling and home education and the extent to which learning is formal or informal. It is well recognised, nonetheless, that there is no clear boundary as to what constitutes formal and informal methods with much overlap between the two approaches.

Formal learning at home is often organised and structured with set learning objectives, whereas informal or unstructured learning – sometimes also known as unschooling – is often not organised and has no set objectives or learning outcomes and can be experiential and based on the child's interests (He et al., 2015). Informal and unstructured learning is considered an integral part of everyday life with no need to allocate specific time or assign specific subjects in advance. A third approach, referred to as non-formal learning, falls somewhere between formal and informal learning in that it can be organised and have learning objectives while also using a more pragmatic and flexible approach (Colley et al., 2003; Werquin, 2008). Neuman (2020) suggests that rather than a trivariate approach, a broader style should be considered regarding the degree of structure in home-schooling, and that this should be seen as a continuum using a range of formal, informal and non-formal approaches and supports to suit the child's individual educational needs and wishes.

Associated with the extent to which home-schooling is structured or unstructured, several ways in which to engage students at home have been investigated. In one UK study, for example, Jones (2013) examined the perspectives and experiences of nine children aged between seven and 14 years on their home education. She found that engagement in learning was linked to children's perceptions of a flexible and supportive learning environment where they had a sense of choice and active and autonomous involvement in their learning (Jones, 2013). Other research suggests engagement is enhanced by using a child-focused approach where home education is driven by the children's interests. Focusing on the home-school experiences of 11 Traveller families in England, D'Arcy (2014) found diverse practices in home education with greater engagement where children and young people had choice and flexibility in their learning, such as using materials more relevant to their lives compared to mainstream schooling. This study also highlighted the extent to which formal and informal approaches to learning at home were influenced by parents' social and financial circumstances. D'Arcy found variability among families, for example, around the use of paid private tuition depending on their financial capacity (D'Arcy, 2014).

Finances and home circumstances were also raised in research from the Czech Republic, where findings

highlighted the importance of time management for parents engaging in home-schooling and the financial implications of this. The study found that, parents were divided in their roles with either one parent working and the other staying at home to home-school or there existed a flexible working model among both parents (Beláňová et al., 2018). Focusing specifically on pedagogy, a French study challenged the ongoing narrative around home-schooling families being motivated by informal learning practices. Bongrand (2019) used the administrative records of a single Parisian suburb to examine the home-school experiences of 70 children from 44 families. He found that most children in the study used formal learning and, in particular, distance learning material and followed a curriculum (Bongrand, 2019). He concluded that 'there may be a significant gap between the discourse of national advocates for home education and local (discourses about) pedagogical practices' (p. 336).

HOME-SCHOOLING IN IRELAND

In Ireland, education is compulsory from six to 16 years of age and can be completed by attending a recognised mainstream school, one of the 124 special schools or through alternative educational settings, including the family home. Home-schooling is legal and governed by the Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann), which explicitly recognises the family as the primary educator of the child:

the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children

(Article 42, Government of Ireland, 1945)

Home-schooling is also referred to in the Education (Welfare) Act (2000), which provides for the right of every child to a 'certain minimum education'¹ in places other than recognised schools. This Act specifically mentions the home as an alternative to a mainstream school.

The implementation and practice of home-schooling in Ireland are regulated by the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, the Department of Education, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Tusla operates the Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS), which is responsible for registering and monitoring children and young people who are home-schooled. Registration for home-schooling is not automatic, however, and there is a legal obligation on parents or guardians to make an application for their child if choosing this approach. Applications for

home-schooling are followed by a preliminary assessment of the education that is planned or being implemented by the parents or guardians. This can include the materials used or proposed and the amount of time spent or proposed to be spent in educating their child (DES, 2003). AEARS can also request occasional ongoing monitoring of home-schooling to determine if the child or children receive a certain minimum education as per the Education (Welfare) Act (2000) mentioned above (DES, 2003).

To date, there is no published empirical research on home education in Ireland, although some administrative data on student numbers are available. Tusla operates a data hub on their website that provides baseline data from AEARS on the number of children on the home-school register and the number of applications received (Tusla, 2022). Tusla also provides monthly accounts of the number of children on the register, the number of assessments carried out and the number of children waiting for assessment for registration (Tusla, 2021). Despite the lack of published research on home-schooling in Ireland, the rise in the numbers of families home educating their children in recent years has been consistently reported in mainstream media (O'Brien, 2022; Walsh, 2018) and has grown particularly since the school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these trends, the main source of information or guidance on home-schooling in Ireland is 20 years old. Published by the then, Department of Education and Science, the report, *Guidelines on the Assessment of Education in Places Other Than Recognised Schools*, provides an in-depth overview of why people may choose to educate their children at home. It also highlighted the push and pull factors, including a child or young person's negative experience of school, difficulties in school as a result of a disability and more philosophical or religious reasons or a preference for a particular educational practice (DES, 2003).

One of the most notable changes in Irish education over the past two decades has been the increased level of diversity in mainstream schools and, more specifically, the rise in the number of students with disabilities. Provision for these students includes mainstream placements with support (such as special education teachers and special needs assistants) and placement in special classes located in mainstream schools or in special schools. Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2018, there have been ongoing debates among education stakeholders about the capacity of mainstream education to meet the needs of every student. While the policy emphasis is on creating more inclusive learning environments, there has been a dramatic growth in the number of special classes over the last decade, with the majority of these classes designated for students with autism (Shevlin & Banks, 2021). Furthermore, Ireland has also

increased the number of special schools in recent years and the capacity within existing special schools has also grown. Despite this growth in provision for students with special educational needs, complaints remain about the lack of suitable school places and shortfalls in provision to fully meet the needs of these children (Ombudsman for Children's Office, 2022). Little to date is known about the extent to which the perceived lack of appropriate school places has influenced the decision to home-school.

INCREASING NUMBERS OF CHILDREN IN IRELAND BEING HOME-SCHOOLED

Administrative data from Tusla is provided to highlight changes in home-schooling in Ireland over time. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of children on the home-schooling register rose from just under 700 (2011) to over 1800 (2021) (Tusla, 2021). There was a clear increase in the number of children being home-schooled in Ireland prior to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures, and a notable

increase of 303 new children and young people registered during the pandemic from 2019 to 2021 (see Figure 2).

Applications increased sharply during the middle of 2020 from 94 applications in quarter 2 to 1122 applications in quarter 3, which would appear to be linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and parents and guardians opting to home educate their children. By the same period in 2021, however, there were significantly fewer applications to home-school, reflecting the return-to-school measures introduced by the government (275 applications in quarter 2 and 456 in quarter 3) (Tusla, 2021).

When looking at trends over the period 2017 to 2021, the age profile of children and young people on the home-school register in Ireland shows that children aged between 11 and 14 years of age are most likely to be home-schooled (Figure 3). This suggests that more families are deciding to home-school at the end of primary education and the beginning of lower secondary education.

Of note is the drop in home-schooling once a child reaches 13 to 14 years old. Tusla has no official record of what happens to these children when they opt out of home-schooling.

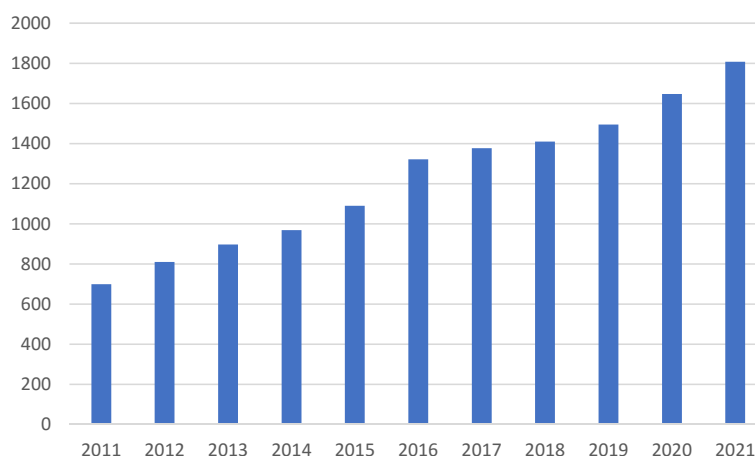


FIGURE 2 Total number of children and young people on the home-school register in Ireland, 2011–2021. *Source:* Tusla (2022).

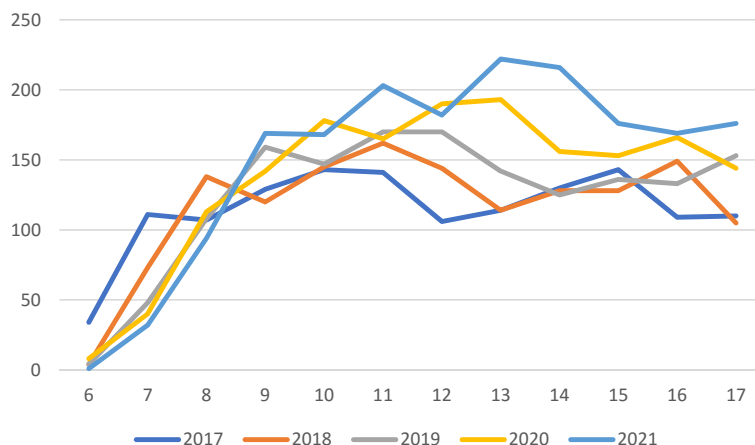


FIGURE 3 Children and young people on the home-school register by age, 2017–2021. *Source:* Tusla (2022).

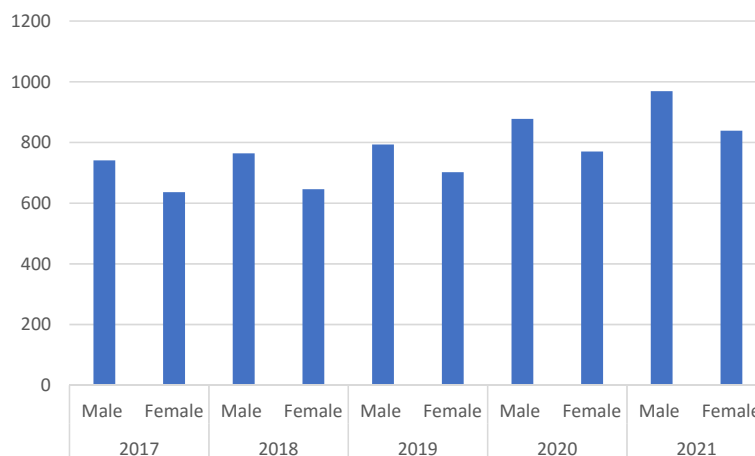


FIGURE 4 Children and young people on the home-school register by gender, 2017–2021. *Source:* Tusla (2022).

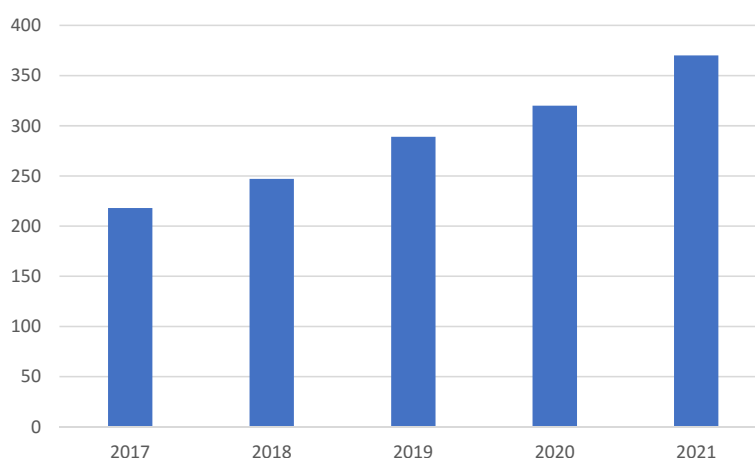


FIGURE 5 Children and young people with special educational needs on the home-school register, 2017–2021. *Source:* Tusla (2022).

Tusla further delineates data according to gender. Figure 4 shows that significantly more boys than girls were home-schooled between 2017 and 2021.

Moreover, Tusla gathers data on the number of children with a reported special educational need who are being home-schooled. Figure 5 shows a gradual increase over time with a slightly larger increase between the years 2018 and 2019 (17% increase), and 2020 and 2021 (16% increase).

This article acknowledges that it is not possible to determine the actual number of home-schooled children and young people or those not enrolled in a public school given that there are families who home-school their children who may not be officially registered with AEARS.

CONCLUSION

Home-schooling continues to become an increasingly sought-after alternative to mainstream schooling in many jurisdictions across Europe. Much of the existing research on home-schooling focuses on the motivations for choosing this approach, with the findings highlighting either

elective, ideological reasons (Bongrand, 2019) or second-choice responses to school issues (Maxwell et al., 2020). This article emphasises highlights the motivations for home-schooling and the approach taken. The research shows that the structure of home-schooling varies considerably depending on parents' social, geolocational and financial circumstances, among other issues. A consistent finding, however, is the rise in the number of families home-schooling. Given the ongoing international and national policy focus on creating more inclusive education systems, the increase in the numbers choosing to home-school or being forced to home-school requires greater attention. Regardless of the motivation, the literature suggests there is a need to re-examine mainstream education and better understand the ways in which some students are excluded. Specific attention should be paid to the reasons that students with disabilities have moved from mainstream education to home-schooling.

Focusing specifically on Ireland, this article elucidates how, compared to other European countries, there is a dearth of research on home-schooling. There is, similarly, limited understanding of parental motivations to

home-school their children and little is known about the practice and implementation of home-schooling for families. Based on an analysis of administrative data and policy documents, it appears that, like to other the UK and other European countries, there has been a steady increase in the number of children and young people being home-schooled in Ireland. The increase in this form of education in Ireland is taking place during a period of change in Ireland's policy around special and inclusive education with much debate among stakeholders as to if and how an inclusive education system can be created (Shevlin & Banks, 2021).

Emerging from the analysis of literature and data specific to Ireland, home-schooling as a research area has been neglected. Future research on this topic should not only include more detail about parental motivations to home-school but also aim to better understand the practice and implementation of home-schooling. There is a particular need to examine home-schooling in the context of ongoing debates about special and inclusive education. Research on the mainstream school and home-school experiences of students with disabilities could provide much-needed evidence to support home-school policy development and resource mechanisms for parents and their children.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study were obtained from Tusla, Child and Family Agency and are available upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics for the research project: Home schooling: implementation and practice in Ireland was obtained from the School of Education's Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin in October 2022.

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ENDNOTE

¹ This certain minimum has not yet been defined in legislation or in official policy. The 2003 *Guidelines on the Assessment of Education in Places Other Than Recognised Schools*, provides a working definition of 'a certain minimum education' for parents, however.

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