



Misuse of key terms by Children's Commissioner and Local Government Association in context of Education Select Committee hearing on home education

There has been much misuse and corruption of terms pertaining to the safeguarding of children and to education in recent reports and statements issued by public bodies. The implications and repercussions of such misuse include mission creep and the erasure of the line between where the state does and does not have a duty to intervene into family and private life, also of harm to those unnecessarily caught up in the safeguarding system and of those children missed in the resulting lack of focus.

While the Local Government Association and the Children's Commissioner are by no means alone in this, their misuse of these terms has been included in reports which will have relevance to the outcome of the Education Select Committee hearing on home education and therefore warrants particular attention.

Terms which already have a legal meaning i.e. 'children missing education' should not be expanded into umbrella terms which lose clarity and subsume categories as is proposed in the Local Government Association (LGA) report of the same name. Despite the Education Act 1996 clearly excluding home educated children from the definition, the LGA chooses to re-interpret and use the term so as to include not only them but also other groups such as children who are not in school due to illness.

The report also jettisons the legal standard for education of 'suitable' in favour of 'formal', defined as "an education that is well-structured, contains significant taught input, pursues learning goals that are appropriate to a child or young person's age and ability..." This furnishes no clarity of meaning as 'well structured', 'significant', 'pursues' and 'appropriate' are all subjective terms as indeed are the notions of 'teaching', 'goals' and 'support'. This is prejudicial and limits rather than expands understanding of the alternative forms of pedagogy which we know are frequently employed by home educators and advocated by many educational thinkers. In other words, the adoption of such a term is a bias highly likely to discriminate against certain forms of recognised, researched and established educational practice.

The Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, describes different cohorts of children as 'invisible'. While 'invisible' is an emotive as opposed to precise term, what it conveys is perhaps children who are out of sight of society, or



whose existence is not known to any official services. Longfield however uses it for a cohort of children fully accounted for, those children and young people who are deregistered from schools and of which the council is informed and should therefore be aware. While parents and carers who home educate their child are not required to inform the council there is no evidence to suggest that these children are unknown to other services such as the NHS. Nor is there any reason to believe that they are in any way out of sight as most home educated children's lives are in fact enmeshed in a myriad of formal and informal children's clubs, local groups and communities. The designation of 'invisible' seems to be growing and should therefore be replaced with a non-pejorative term which more accurately describes the position of these children such as 'not known to the local authority'.

'Vulnerable' is likewise used by Longfield for numerous cohorts of children, including recently the 24,500 children deregistered from school in 2017-18. There is no legal definition of what constitutes a 'vulnerable' child, an issue she explored in 2017. In her report, *'On measuring the number of vulnerable children in England'* she defined them as "...children who carry with them risks and difficulties which make it much harder for them to succeed in life, to be healthy and happy, and have a chance at a good future." In this report she outlines 32 'vulnerable' categories including children from 'non intact' families and children from a 'BAME background'. In 2017 however the Children's Commissioner did not include home educated children in this list of the 'vulnerable'. Why would she? There is no evidence to suggest that these children are in any way less likely to succeed.

Precision and accuracy around these terms matters greatly. Including children who do not need help in these categories risks obliterating the line between where families can have reasonable expectations of privacy and where the state has a duty to intervene. When huge numbers of children are swept up into the categories of 'invisible', 'vulnerable' and 'children missing education' our ability to discuss causes, or to help those children who need help is hampered. How can we identify those who need social services support and intervention, and those who do not if the words used for both are the same?



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