Home Education - The Third Way in Education: Thinking the Unthinkable

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Questioning the way we are

Should school be a place where children go because they want to go? Yes. Should school be a place where children only go if they want to? Yes.

This paper questions the way that we educate our children, taking evidence, not from a school based perspective, but from research (Rothermel 1999a) into those families who choose not to use the system placed there for our benefit by successive British governments: those children who are educated out of school.

Time for Change

There are many important figures questioning the school system and saying it must change. The MP, Don Foster:

'As we move towards the next millennium, the greatest challenge facing us all is to develop an education system that is truly inclusive, from the cradle to the grave; where the keys to learning are available to any one at any age. We must not do the same things better, we must do them differently.'

(Foster, 1998)

And Tom Bentley, member of the independent think-tank DEMOS and advisor to David Blunkett MP, Secretary of State for Education and Employment:

> 'This learning will not take place only inside schools and colleges, but in communities, work places and families. It requires a shift in our thinking about the fundamental organisational unit of education, from the school, an institution where learning is organised, defined and
>
> contained, to the learner, an intelligent agent with the potential to learn from any and all of her encounters with the world around her. Without such a change the education system will be unable to meet the demands of the twenty-first century.'

(Bentley, 1998)

Seeking Evidence

How though, can we really determine what kind of education is best if we only ever look to one method? How many surveys of children in school, begin with the question: 'Do you enjoy school or is there something else you would rather be doing?' The Evidence Based-Education Network, based at the University of Durham is calling for policy to be based on evidence: 'We need to change that culture so that the question, ‘Where is the evidence?’ becomes the first thing we think of when presented with a suggested change of practice or policy.' (Coe 1999)

We send millions of children to school every day without ever really searching for evidence of whether this is the best possible option for all children. In 1996/97 permanent exclusions from primary, secondary and special schools in England amounted to 12,700 (DfEE 1999a). Each year approximately 15% of pupils in state maintained schools in England, miss, without authorisation, at least a ½ day of school (DfEE 1999a), a figure relatively stable over the last 10 years: this amounts to the equivalent of 8 million lost school days each year (DFEE 1999b). Moreover, there may be as many as 50,000 children educated outside school (ACE 1999). Combine this with the data that in 1997/98 there were 9,144,000 children aged 5-16 in the population, but only 8,583,400 registered in schools (DfEE 1999c). Where were the other 560,600? Whatever else, these figures provide strong evidence that very many children and families are voting with their feet. Something is wrong and it is not teachers who are at fault: an ageing stagnant system, blinkered by fear of its own anachronistic nature, is more likely the cause. Hoyle (1998) spoke of the rationale behind imposed education:

> 'Indeed, it may be useful to recall that an intended outcome for the introduction of compulsory education was to maintain social order in a way which obviated the need for more overt forms of coercion […]'
>
> Hoyle (1998)

More recently Robinson (1999) has written:

> Our present education system was planned in the Forties to produce an industrial workforce that was 80 per cent manual and 20 percent professional workers. […] This system may have been right for its time. It won't do now.
>
> Robinson (1999)

The existence of school, however, is not being questioned here, but rather the exclusive and inclusive nature of the system, and the compulsion it brings to bear: exclusive because so many children and families are excluded, yet inclusive, because the system does not provide for a mainstream alternative to school. Compulsion, because what choice there is, is little choice at all - summed up by usage of the term 'compulsory school age' (Education Act 1996 s. 7) in a country where school is not compulsory.

Blame and Square Pegs in Round Holes

Who should take the blame - bad teachers, bad children, bad parents or the government? The blame is everybody's, whether involved with education or not. Contemplating change is never easy, but there is evidence that the children at least, could survive new direction. Jordan (1999) described:

> […] that effective learning can take place out[side] the school walls and without the daily direct mediation of a teacher: France, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and increasingly the African countries make use of

> various forms of open and distance learning approaches for many pupils who cannot or do not wish to attend a school regularly.
>
> Jordan (1999)

Some children may just not thrive in the competitive atmosphere of school, where competition begins as soon as they walk through the door. In an environment where there are winners, it is inherent that there are losers. This is not to suggest that competition is wrong per se, just that for some children, it is. Describing the school ethos, Jones (1999) wrote:

> ‘Competition means limiting success to a minority. You can only win if someone else loses […] As long as [politicians] insist on a competitive system, there will be losers.’
>
> Jones (1999)

So are we looking, in this paper, to target a class of underdogs, the children at the bottom for whom alternative provision needs to be made? Is this yet another missive reminding us of the government's push towards social inclusion for the terminally excluded? No. We are looking at your children and mine. Children for whom school is not a suitable option come from all walks of life (Rothermel 1999a). This is reason enough, why choice should be made available, across the board.

The Right Not to Go to School

At present, there is a choice, under the Education Act (1996, s.7), (the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 makes similar provision), for children to receive their 'efficient full-time education,' suitable to their 'age, ability and aptitude' either at 'school', or 'otherwise'. Whilst the school option involves formal assessment and inspection, the 'otherwise' alternative, involves neither, in any legislative form.

> 'LEAs, however, have no automatic right of access to the parent’s home. Parents may refuse a meeting in the home, if they can offer an alternative way of demonstrating that they are providing a suitable education, for example, through showing examples of work and agreeing to a meeting at another venue."
>
> DfEE (1998b)

To home-educate children in the UK, one does not need a teaching qualification nor any specialist equipment and whilst some families follow a routine for learning, others do not. Growing numbers of parents, both secular and religious, who decide to home-educate their children from very early on, treat life with their children as a continuum, whereby there is no recognisable 'start date' for education and life follows family activities combined with each child's individual needs. If children can have such freedoms as these, devoting, perhaps, just 2 or 3 hours daily to academic pursuit and still maintain academic 'standards' (Rothermel 1999a), why do we want to force any child into school if they do not want to be there?

In a civilised society, surely the answer is to provide choice to all children, in partnership with their parents, so that those who do not want to receive a school education can be supported by parents and professionals in the creation of their own learning experience, free of those aspects of education that are creating their misery and 'dumbing down' (Gatto 1992) their intellectual development.

Current UK Research

My research (Rothermel 1999a) has studied 1000 home-educating families, involving approximately

2000 children, qualitatively and quantitatively, over a three-year period. Some of the results are described here, together with an explanation of how such results can point to a 'third way' in education. An important point to make here, is that all the children assessed, were, for the most part, unaccustomed to the formal nature of testing and so took the assessments in their stride, as another 'game' to be played. There was little evidence of the nerves and anticipation that one normally associates with examinations. The resulting effect may have been that the children were relaxed and therefore, able to work to their potential, knowing that their performance was without expectation or consequence and that they could withdraw at anytime.

Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) Start & End of Reception - background data

In the first batch of assessments (PIPS Project 1997,1998), a group of 36 families was followed over a year: the families were interviewed twice and their four year olds assessed at what would be the 'Start' and 'End' of their 'Reception Year'. An analysis of the resulting background data revealed that:

- for 71% of families, neither parent had undergone formal teacher training;
- 58% of parents had received their own education at a comprehensive school;
- 11% of the sample were single parent families;
- Higher education qualifications were held by just 37% of the parents whilst the remaining 63% had no professional qualifications.
- Families without a television in the home totalled 36%. Computers were represented in 33% of households: 14% owning a computer but no television and 19% both a computer and a television. For 22% of families, there was neither computer nor television in the household.

The main reasons for home-educating were cited as:

- 'having a close family relationship and being together'
- 'having the freedom and flexibility to do what we want, when we want'
- 'learning together'
- 'being able to let the children learn in their own style, developing naturally'.

The children came from very mixed backgrounds: amongst the sample were traveller families, city dwellers, rural inhabitants, children with same sex parents, single families, children living in very depressed economic conditions and those living in comfortable, stereotypical 'middle class' families.

The most cited 'problem' with home-education, was, 'other people's opinions', a sad reflection, perhaps, on our unwillingness to accommodate change and difference.

PIPS (1998) Start & End of Reception: assessment data

The assessments with these children revealed interesting results.

- Where the national average score was 54, the home-educated children scored 97 at what would have been their 'Start of Reception'. Translated into standardised scores this indicated that, at the 'Start of Reception', 63% of the home-educated sample fell into a score bracket usually occupied by just 2-3% of children nationally.
- Despite the high percentages of home-educated children achieving above average scores at the 'Start of Reception', their performance in terms of value-added progress during the year, was rather poor: for Maths, they maintained the expected learning incline over the period, whilst in English, only 27% of the group managed average, or above average, progress. However, the impact of these low value-added scores was marginal in view of the finding that by the 'End of Reception' 21% of home-educated children still scored two standard deviations above the norm, where nationally, there were 2-3% of children.
- Curiously, at the 'Start of Reception' the children performed significantly better at maths than reading, but by the 'End', they scored significantly worse at maths than reading.
- At no stage, however, was there a significant difference between genders.
- Comparing assessment results from the home-educated four year-olds with the classifications of parental social class (Rose and O'Reilly 1998), it was found that the average score of children from professional families (classes 1 and 2) was significantly inferior to that attained by children at the lower end of the socio-economic class scale (classes 3, 4 and 6).

PIPS Start & End of Reception: what might the results mean?

- If children can achieve high levels of learning, at home, from a parent, or parents, without formal training, where the socio-economic level of the family is low to moderate and the family not necessarily the traditional kind, why are we placing increasing numbers of very young children into schooling and letting them and parents believe, from early on that gender (Cassidy 1999), poverty and family circumstance alone will commit their children to failure (Davies 1999)?

  The answer seems all too simple - divert funds from early schooling into parenting support and provide financial incentives (*Citizen's Income 1997)* to assist parents to spend the maximum amount of time with their children during these early years. Centres, staffed by professionals, welcoming both parents and children together, would, perhaps, be far more constructive than this early separation, where the state takes over the rearing of our children increasingly early and whereby once separated, parents often find it difficult to re-accustom themselves to the full-time care of their children. If children can learn so successfully with parental support, then this is surely what they

should have most access to? And the teachers? Place them in a caring, supportive role, where they can work from early years centers, supporting parents and providing assistance on a low, professional to parent and child, ratio. Where parents become their children's assistants, the teacher can focus on facilitating the child and parent's learning. Non working parents provided with financial incentives, would no longer be costing the system in terms of creating training schemes for jobs they may not even want, whilst their children are cared for by someone they may not even like. That is to say, the surplus parent would become the child's main support.

- Since Rothermel's (1999b) home-educated sample began their 'Reception Year' at such a high standard and finished it still ahead, this may indicate the benefits of supported, intensive parenting for young children generally and could be taken as evidence that a later formal education starting age would offer a positive benefit to children. Similarly, if 'no school' equates to 'no gender differences', boys, who are usually thought to be at an educational disadvantage in particular (Cassidy 1999), might derive especial benefit from a later school starting age.
- The exceedingly high number of home-educators who do not use televisions may itself be a contributory factor to the children's high performance under relatively informal regimes.
- With respect to class distinctions between levels of attainment, it was plausible that the parents at the lower end of the social spectrum were conscious of their divergence from the norm and were thus keen that their children should remain on par with national standards. It might have been the case, too, that local education authorities made more demands on low income families, echoing their anxieties for the children. As the results demonstrated, there was no need for such concern. More importantly, if the absence of school can remove the socio-economic education bias towards the better off, then there must surely be a place for such a system that can, for some and by choice, remove school from the equation, in the quest to raise standards of education. The idea of maintaining the mediocre when there is potential for the best, is surely ludicrous.
- The children from families at higher socio-economic levels may have been learning under more liberal values, but this method, as the results illustrated, was nevertheless, a recipe for success. The key to these findings, for all families, was, it seems, the availability of parents, on tap.

The research, as highlighted, did not only involve these few baseline assessed children: besides the 2000 or so children covered by the questionnaire survey, 210 children were assessed individually, using a variety of academic, social and psychological testing. The points raised above, whilst relating specifically to the 'Reception' cohort, apply across the whole group. Throughout the primary age range, the home-educated children outperformed their school counterparts.

Overview

The main points that have come from this paper and from the research generally are that:

A great number of children and their families are not happy with the current educational options. For most, this, so-called, ‘choice’ is between, for 'better or for worse' inclusion, or total exclusion. Many children go to school because they and their families are too anxious about the consequences of not doing so - fears of retribution from families, friends and authorities. Many more are not even aware that they have a choice between school and ‘otherwise’ education.

Ethnic minority children sometimes remain at home ‘unlawfully’: their families ignorant of the law, unsupported and treated when ‘found out’, as criminals. Galloway (1985 p.131) and Hoyle (1998) have shown that legal action in cases of truancy has little effect on school attendance: therefore, it is possible that such families feel victimized by the state. For some of these children, part-time voluntarily attendance at learning centres would seem to offer a more appropriate alternative. A society that does not accept such diverse needs is a poor society indeed.

Some professionals may believe that if an alternative to school is to be acceptable and considered part of mainstream education, the idea of 'choice' should, nevertheless, involve compulsion. However, this paper emphasises, that the key to making such an opportunity work, is through incentives, trust and support, not coercion.

Family cohesiveness is more beneficial to development than any amount of state imposed caring educational provision. As the revised national curriculum for the Year 2000 comes into existence and target setting for 3 year olds becomes a reality, we are simply looking in the wrong direction.

The Third Way in Education: proposals

- Create the third way in education by legislating for a third option - registered learning center attendance, by choice, at will and hours to suit, without cost to the child/family user.
- Create financial incentives for parents who wish to take responsibility for their children and accompany them to learning centers.
- Free such learning centres of any compulsory adherence to standardised assessment or imposed curriculum.
- Staff learning centres with caring professionals who are there to foster imagination and innovation, helping children to explore their own potential, and assisting parents to actively support their children in this exploration.

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