

Home-based education effectiveness research and some of its implications.

Yehudi Menuhin went to school for one day. Although he said he did not dislike it, one day was enough and the rest of his education was home-based. This kind of approach - adopting the home-based education option - has been taken up by more and more parents in a variety of countries over the last twenty years.

In the USA, over a million families are reported to be 'home-schoolers' as they are known across the Atlantic. In the UK, the number of families opting for home-based education has grown from about 20 families in 1977 to about 5,000 in 1994. In Australia, 20,000 home-based educators are reported including those using the radio schools system for children in the Outback remote areas of the country. In Canada, 10,000 are officially known and 30,000 estimated as the real total. In New Zealand the figure quoted is 3,000. In all cases, these figures have been rising steadily over the last twenty years and continue to rise.

As the numbers rise and the results are noted, official respect has been gained. A letter from Boston University undergraduates admissions director proclaims:

"Boston University welcomes applications from home-schooled students. We believe students educated primarily at home possess the passion for knowledge, the independence, and self reliance that enable them to excel in our intellectually challenging programs of study"

Every time the subject appears in a newspaper article, or is the subject of a radio programme, or is featured in a TV programme, more people come on board convinced that this option is worth trying to try to solve their educational difficulties or dissatisfactions. They are surprised to find not just that it works, but that it works very well. The earlier question of whether home-educated children will lose out in some way is now replaced by another question, now that the evidence has been accumulated. It is, 'why are they so remarkably successful?'

On social skills, for example, a study by Larry Shyers found that home-schooled students received significantly lower problem-behaviour scores than schooled children. His next finding was that home-schooled children are socially well adjusted but schooled children are not so well adjusted. Shyers concludes that we are asking the wrong question when we ask about the social development of home-schooled children. The real question is why is the social adjustment of schooled children of such poor quality?

A study by Thomas Smedley used different test instruments but comes to the same conclusion that home-educated children are more mature and better

socialised than those attending school. Some possible reasons emerge from this study:

1. The classroom is mostly one-way communication often of a stilted kind and few meaningful interchanges are in evidence. In home-based education the opposite is the case.
2. Schools are products of the factory age with batches of uniform products running on the conveyor belt in lockstep motion towards the standardised diploma. It therefore socialises into this kind of mentality. Home-based education, in contrast, works to more personalised educational outcomes.
3. An unnatural aspect of school is age segregation. Learning to get along with peers alone does not prepare students for varied interactions with older and younger people in life. Home-based education avoids this trap for in the home-school learning programmes, people of various ages are encountered in a way that more accurately mirrors the variety of society.
4. The emphasis of home-based education on self-discipline and self-directed learning and the personal confidence this produces, creates young people who can adapt to new situations and new people.

A study of 53 adults who experienced home-based education was conducted by J. Gary Knowles of the University of Michigan. He found that more than three-quarters of the sample had felt that being educated at home had actually helped them interact with people from different levels of society. When asked if they would want to be educated at home if they had their lives over again, 96% replied 'Yes'. Factors that were commonly highlighted by the adults concerned were the self-directed curriculum, the individualised pace of working, and the flexibility of the home-study programme. None of the sample were unemployed or on welfare assistance, and two thirds were married - the norm for the age group. Knowles concludes that the idea of there being social disadvantages to home-based education was not supported by the evidence, which rather favoured the reverse.

The academic excellence of home-schooled children has been repeatedly demonstrated in the research. The earlier findings were that they consistently score at or above the 50th percentile on standardised achievement tests, with more than half scoring at the 70th and 80th percentile. Later studies reported by Brain Ray put home-schooled children at least two years in front of their schooled counterparts in intellectual achievement and sometimes as much as ten years ahead.

As regards science, Hornick studied a group of seven families with teenage children in Massachusetts to find out how science was learned in home schools. He found that the parents in the sample did not teach science to their teenagers: the teenagers taught themselves. The result was 'inquiry science of the very highest quality'. The students performed as real scientists in exploring phenomena, making hypotheses, designing and carrying out tests and analysing and evaluating results. Memorising texts and doing worksheets was not in evidence but textbooks were used as a source of ideas and reference.

The families saw science as a 'hands on' activity. Science shows on television were used extensively and trips to science museums, farms, nature centres and national parks 'were a staple of the science curricula'. The parents, whose own backgrounds in science were slight, learnt with their children rather than gave any instruction. They saw themselves sometimes as learning coaches and

sometimes as fellow inquirers. Parents operated with a sense of the 'teachable moments' when their teenagers' interest and curiosity had been aroused. Every family agreed that locating suitable resources was the key to their science learning and this was the justification for the extensive use of TV and field trips.

Hornick's assessment of the scientific knowledge and understanding gained was that it was of the highest standards but that the families were largely unaware of this and rather took the quality of their learning for granted:

"When I asked 13 year-old Louis what science he knew, he neglected to mention that he is an expert at identifying medicinal herbs and preparing oils and tinctures; for him this was his small business not science. "

The study by Marchant of the use of computers by home-schoolers was unusual in its research approach. It had three parts to it. The first consisted of a summary of data obtained from a directory of those home-schooling families interacting through an education bulletin board. The second was a content analysis of the notes posted on the bulletin board. In the final part, other researchers joined Marchant in posting questions to the home-schoolers on-line and the responses were analysed.

He found that 185 families from 37 states were exchanging ideas and information on a regular basis without ever physically meeting. The characteristics of this group were analysed without any assumption being made that they were typical of the general population of home-schoolers. Marchant found that this group were knowledgeable and sophisticated. The parents were a fairly well-educated group who felt that their own formal education had contributed little to their success as home-educating parents. They were well equipped in terms of modern computer technology and know-how, and even though they tended to downplay the importance of this, the impact on the competence of the children was hard to ignore.

In 1993 the Francombe Place Research Associates undertook a survey of home study in Canada, state by state. The author D.S.Smith obtained responses from the Deputy Ministers of Education and the 30 Home-schooling associations in Canada. He found that home-schooling was firmly entrenched and officially recognised as an acceptable educational option. Official records showed about 10,000 registered families but estimates from the records of the associations suggested more like 30,000 since many families do not register.

The diversity of parents involved was apparent:

"They are, by any classification, a diverse lot: housewives, teachers, doctors, back-to-the-landers, lawyers, francophones, anglophorzes, fundamentalists ministers, farmers, and just plain parents, of all faiths and creeds. All of whom are united in one common belief: they are concerned about their children and their children's education. Concerned enough to do something about it themselves. " (p. 15)

As studies in other countries have found, the motives and methods of these home-educating families are also diverse but the success rates are increasingly undisputed:

"Homeschooling is the most private form of education, for it has as its core the family and the family unit. We know homeschooling works for those who are prepared to invest the effort. We know it has inherent values. We know it is not for everyone. " (p.57)

Smith was interested to see if the next generation would home-school. The response was positive and typical responses were that 'when I get married and have children of my own I will definitely home school'. One reason was that the order of priorities was seen as different:

*"Our order of priorities is often the reverse of the ordinary world. We **begin** with happiness. " (p.71)*

In the UK, Alan Thomas, a visiting Australian scholar, became interested in home-based education because of his interest in individualised learning. He interviewed 23 families in the Greater London area and carried out observations of 10 of them. The research is ongoing and also involves a sample of families in Australia.

Parents were asked to share in the joint venture of exploring how their children learned. Observations were mainly undertaken in the kitchen, where so much home-based education in the form of conversations, takes place and it was recorded with pen and paper. The qualitative data was subjected to content analysis to identify emergent themes.

Families starting out on home-based education who at first adopted formal methods of learning found themselves drawn more and more into less formal learning. Families who started out with informal learning at the outset found themselves drawn into even more informal learning. The methods that both groups grew into had much more in common with the methods of younger children. The sequencing of learning material, the bedrock of learning in school, was seen increasingly as unnecessary and unhelpful.

Learning to read was a central concern:

"However informal their approach, parents are obviously concerned that their children learn to read and take steps to ensure that they do. Even so, a few did not insist when their children showed no inclination to learn. Curiously, these children who learned to read relatively late still went on very quickly to read material suitable for their age. Most of the children were voracious readers. " (Thomas 1994)

Thomas stresses that his work is in the early stages and should not be regarded as the last word on the matter. Nevertheless, he is already aware that his research challenges one of the fundamental assumptions of schooling:

"This study challenges the almost universally held view that children of school age need to be formally taught if they are to learn. In school this may be the case but at home they can learn just by living. "

Researching home-based education has been a remarkable experience that has helped me personally to review most of my assumptions as a practising teacher about educational matters. I have come to feel very privileged to have been a witness to it all and astonished that the significance of it has been ignored. But then, as John Taylor Gatto observes:

"It is the great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass schooling that among even the best of my fellow teachers, and among even the best of my students' parents, only a small number can imagine a different way to do things. "

There have been a few outbursts of interest from time to time in the press, radio and television, but it has not been sustained. The Guardian educational editor informed that they had 'done' home-based education. This was one article in the year, whereas the dreary tried-and-failed idea of a National Curriculum had a section on it every week for several years. Partly because of its low profile in the media in general, the actual significance of home-based education has hardly begun to be recognised. It questions all the fundamental assumptions underpinning the antiquated institution of school as well as pointing to ways of regenerating and reconstructing education systems suitable for the contemporary scene in the direction of flexi-schooling and flexi-education.

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