

O. K. - You're certified!

"O.K. You're certified," said the friendly twelve year-old boy. Throughout 25 years of advocating the democratisation of schools I have often feared these words yet when they were finally delivered the context was delightful. I was visiting the Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts.

The introductory tour took us to the music room. As a one-time jazz musician I have a compulsion to try out musical instruments. On opening the grand piano our guide politely asked *"Are you certified to do that? I don't want to have to bring you up!"*. He explained that every specialist area of the school was managed by a 'corporation' of students and staff who had a particular expertise and interest in that area. I needed a member of the music corporation to certify me on the piano before I was free to play it. I asked who could do this.

"I can," he said. *"Play me something you love."*

Eight bars of Satin Doll later - *"That's real pretty. O.K. You're certified"*. He added my name to the list of the certified and in those few moments I learned a great deal about this truly and remarkably democratic school.

Had I not been certified I would have been brought up before the J.C. - Judicial Committee - for breaking one of the many school rules, all of which are agreed by the school meeting or the specialist corporation on a strictly one person one vote basis, and all of which can be changed democratically. The J.C. consists of students representing different age groups and a staff member, the business being conducted by two elected clerks who are always older students.

The first thing to strike a visitor to Sudbury Valley School is that there are a lot of people around. The school is currently full with 210 students aged from 4-19 and for the first time since its foundation in 1968 is oversubscribed with plans for extensions to the buildings. Yet although there is no overt adult supervision of anything, the facilities are well looked after, the extensive library is in good shape, computers work and normally rooms are reasonably tidy though everything is in constant use.

David Gribble of Sands School had told me that *"It will feel like break (recess) when you arrive"*. He was right - and it went on feeling like break for the whole 4 days of our visit! There are no teacher organised lessons the curriculum being totally generated by the students. The many rooms of varying sizes do not feel like classrooms. Individuals, small and not so small groups of students are everywhere. Occasionally they are with a staff member (not often referred to as teachers) working at anything from algebra to apple pie making. These tutorials/seminars are always at the request of students - either individual or group

(often of mixed ages) - and will continue for as long as the students feel they need them. If after two sessions student interest fades no pressure at all will be exerted by staff for the 'course' or 'project' to be completed to the satisfaction of the adults.

The USA is mercifully free of national examinations. Each state accredited school can devise its own school leaving graduation. At Sudbury Valley this consists of a defended thesis, delivered to a full school assembly of students, staff, governors and parents, justifying that the student is ready to leave school and cope in the big wide world.

Of Ofsted's Assessment, Recording and Reporting there is no sign. There is no formal assessment of student's work. No records of achievement or progress are kept and no reports given to parents. There are currently ten staff but many are part-time. Their contracts are reviewed annually and by secret ballot students decide whose will be renewed and for how many days per week. Although fees are low by US or UK standards the school is in good financial shape. Co-operation with the local Framingham School Board is close and supportive. Roughly half the students are 'lifers' who have been at the school from early choice. The other half are 'refugees' from the region's public (state) schools.

The support for the school of all the students I spoke to was total but especially impressive were the comments of some of the refugees. Bullying was mentioned by several as their reason for transferring to Sudbury Valley. *"Does it happen here?"* I asked.

"It's just not possible", was the reply. *"The bullies would be brought up at J.C. and it would stop. If it didn't the case would go to trial before the school meeting and if it still didn't stop they would be thrown out of school."*

"When was the last trial of a bully?" I asked. Nobody could remember. Several J.C. cases that we observed concerned what might be the first stage of bullying - they were all settled amicably but firmly after very fair exploration of both sides.

The first teacher that I met from the school was Mimsy Sadofsky. I asked the obvious literacy questions. "They learn to read in their own time and when they feel the need," she said. "Nobody ever leaves the school unable to read though we have had quite a few who did not learn until they were nine or ten. Even though statistically we must have had our 10% of potential dyslexics there has never been a dyslexic student at Sudbury Valley."

I pressed Danny Greenberg, a founder staff member and philosopher of the school, about what becomes of ex-SVS students after they leave. He directed me to *Legacy of Trust* - the most recent and extensive of two longitudinal studies of ex-students going back to the original intake in 1968. Virtually all have made a success of their lives in their own terms and look back to SVS as a time that truly belonged to them rather than some thing that was done to them by teachers or a national curriculum! It makes exciting reading.

Derry Hannam

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Early Childhood Education: the Way Forward

A Report on the Education Now Day Conference, 25th
November 1995

The overall feeling that one came away with was that the 5 speakers, from different perspectives, all concurred with John Holt's message that

"Traditional authoritarian education is increasingly obsolete. The case for (it) seems to me much weaker than it has been, and is getting ever weaker; and the case for an education which will give a child primarily not knowledge and certainty, but resourcefulness, flexibility, curiosity, skill in learning, readiness to unlearn, grows ever stronger."

(*The Underachieving School*, 1971, Penguin Books)

It is salutary to realise that he said this 25 years ago. And yet - after almost the same number of years of a Tory government determinedly nudging education backwards into more circumscribed, didactic, structured curricula, where testable outcomes rule the day - the conference speakers were still having to suggest ways and means of offering young children opportunities for developing in their own inimitable ways, within a genuinely democratic framework.

Roland Meighan, by producing his new book on Holt's work (*John Holt: Personalised Education and the Reconstruction of Schooling*, 1995), and in his conference talk *Revisiting John Holt*, has done us a great service. Most of us who were young students or teachers in the 1960s and 70s, were familiar with at least some of Holt's works. It is important that the new generation of educators be introduced to ideas which are not only inspirational, but also re-assert the educational goals which we know in our hearts to be the truly significant and valuable ones - those of individual choice; free play; self-initiated activities; imaginative and creative pursuits; interpersonal relationships; living and working democracy.

Iram Siraj-Blatchford, in considering the unique strengths of combined Nursery Centres, took up some of these themes. She started by putting the development of Nursery Centres into the context of the changed needs of families; the developing notions of 'quality'; the tensions between the demands of consensus and the need for diversity; the existing range of settings, training and qualifications; and the relationship between education and care. She then showed how Nursery Centres have the potential to offer the kind of approaches in early education which Holt strived for children, variety, continuity and progression, active learning - all combining education and care.

It was heartening to hear Iram emphasise how vitally important early years practitioners are, both to the children involved and to society in general. When she proclaimed "We are holding the world together", she sent us out on a high.

Chris Pascal and Tony Bertram extended the theme of quality by outlining how their present nationwide research project (*Effective Early Learning Research Project: Evaluating and Developing Quality in Early Childhood Settings*) is attempting to help practitioners find ways of improving the standard and effectiveness of their work with young children. Again, we heard echoes of what the earlier speakers had highlighted about the importance of adopting a developmental approach; a democratic approach, "where everyone has a voice"; a rigorous but flexible framework; the need to monitor and assess the processes of learning as well as the outcomes; and the need to work with parents and carers, and establish genuine home/centre co-operation.

Finally, Philip Gammage, looking at *The Way Forward* for professional training and development, turned initially to medical science and his belief that the proliferation of genetic manipulation will have a profound effect on society. He highlighted the fact that changes which have *already* taken place in society will generate even greater changes in the future. Even now, changes in employment, and womens' greater freedom, have meant significant alterations to care provision.

Clearly, if the world into which our children are growing is going to be a profoundly altered one, student teachers need to develop not only a good understanding of how children's learning and thinking develop, but also the ability to offer them programmes which encourage and promote initiative, creativity, imagination and social skills. Any training must take these sorts of factors into account, and must include studying human development in cultural and societal contexts.

Taking the conference as a whole, and going back to its title, *Early Childhood Education: The Way Forward*, I believe we had not only a most provocative day, but one which reminded us of some of the textural qualities of education which are so difficult to hang on to in these days of 'measurement', 'delivery', 'market forces', clients and "locking (the) student into a prescribed sequence of learning, determined in advance" (*Freedom and Beyond*, Holt, 1972). In this way we were revitalised in our quest to find the *Right Way Forward*.

Jenefer Joseph

Creativity in Education Project at The Open University

Since October 1995 an innovative postgraduate course for educators entitled *Creativity in Education* has been offered at

The Institute for Creativity in London. The six-month course is accredited by the Open University. It was invented by Jana Dugal and Christine Kimberley at The Institute and Anna Craft at The O.U. in the belief that it is deeply needed by educators. Why?

Our society is transforming. Children, young people and adults are faced with an increasing chaos of choice and social identity in all spheres of life. Features of this age include its instability, complexity, transience and lack of conformity. This fluidity and chaos of choice is played out in many arenas of life: political, economic, social, spiritual and technological. The implications for education are far-reaching. Both teachers and learners require greater self-direction, personal resourcefulness, inventiveness and flexibility. In other words, more than ever before, education needs to foster creativity.

The course supports educators in enabling both their own creativity and that of others. This year's students come from primary, secondary and FE sectors, from LEA advisory services, governor training, youth work, creative personal development and interactive multi-media.

Linked with the course is an Open University research project investigating what nourishes the educator in enabling creativity. Initial findings indicate that such nourishment effectively means supporting the educator's core values. Within our present student group, core value themes include:

- the teacher/learner relationship
- fostering self-esteem and self-confidence of teachers and learners
- a positive attitude toward learners and their achievements
- risk-taking
- empathy in enabling others to make meaningful connections
- critical reflection on practice and a willingness to adapt plans and to be spontaneous (personal flexibility)
- time and space for teachers to foster their own creativity

Christine, Jana and I will be talking about aspects of enabling creativity at a one-day conference in Central London on 22nd June 1996. Other speakers include Professor Philip Gammage of Nottingham University and Peter Skinner of the CBI Education Foundation. There will be many workshops to choose from on themes such as personal identity and creative action, aspects of creative teaching, schools and other structures, continuing professional development and forms of education for the 21st Century. The conference fee, including lunch, is £35.

Anna Craft

For more information about:

the course: send an A4 SAE to The Institute for Creativity, 2nd Floor, 264-268 Holloway Road, London N7

the research project or conference: send an SAE to Anna Craft, Creativity in Education Project, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA (01908 652652)

Anna is a keynote speaker at Education Now's own *Creativity in Education* Conference on 9th November at the International Co-operative College, Loughborough. Full details next time.

Dreaming for real

- The dream began when Geoff, my husband who is dyslexic, first tried Dragon Dictate, a voice recognition programme, at the Education Now office.
- Frank Reeves, Vice Principal of Bilston Community College, allowed the dream to develop by introducing Geoff and I to Liz Millman at the College. She invited us to join the Key-in Centre to work with those, who like Geoff, had dyslexic needs.
- A big step forward: Tom West (Dyslexia Consultant, USA) and Roland Meighan (Special Professor of Education, University of Nottingham) led well-attended conferences at Ryton Hall in Shropshire and Hanley Castle, near Malvern. The dyslexics who attended went away feeling good about themselves and motivated to do something further.
- The technology has advanced apace since Geoff first trained. Now, a scanner can be used to put text into the voice recognition programme for those needing help with reading. Aptech, the leading company in this field, is constantly researching the needs of dyslexics.
- Our dream is to train those like Geoff who then, in the spirit of living democracy, will pass on their know-how to others.
- This will enable College Resource Centres and Libraries to incorporate voice recognition. Previously, the hold-up was - who will train the user?
- We anticipate initially setting up training groups in the Midlands and then further afield.

Iris Harrison

Developing the Global Teacher: Theory and Practice in Initial Teacher Education

Miriam Steiner (ed), (1996) Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books

This book examines how those involved in Initial Teacher Education can contribute to the development of teachers who will play a role in shaping more just communities - local, national and global.

ISBN 1 85 856 032 2 Price: £13 95

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Book Review

Early Childhood Education: The Way Forward,
Philip Gammage and Janet Meighan (eds.)
Education Now Books (1995)

This book explores in depth many vitally important issues in the area of early childhood education. As one comes to expect from Education Now publications, it goes far beyond simply examining difficulties and a long way towards proposing solutions. There are ideas which can be put immediately into practice within existing facilities, as well as long-term hopes for the future development of provision. Moving away from a 'should we, shouldn't we' debate, the book clearly acknowledges and accepts the demand for nursery education. It allows the contributors to concentrate on, for example, 'how best' to develop facilities which fulfil the double role of care and education, 'how best' to involve parents in the educational process.

To give an example, the first chapter, *Expanding combined nursery provision: bridging the gap between care and education* (Iram Siraj-Blatchford) begins by exploring the "disorder and disarray of early childhood services; which some refer to as 'diversity and choice'" (p2). It points out how many different categories of care already exist, with wide variations in quality, facilities, levels of staff training and so on. Current diversity, therefore, means diversity of standards leading to inequality, and current choice means choice only if you can afford it or if local provision is available. The way forward is proposed with an analysis of the benefits and solutions offered by combined nursery centres.

A delightful chapter, *Stories for the classroom: what works? Developmentally appropriate practice* (Jennifer Little) is introduced by a metaphor of a butterfly forced to hatch prematurely, and disastrously, by the impatience of an onlooker. This idea is developed through poignant stories and commentaries exploring how children develop at such different rates, in different ways, and that this natural and gradual process should be nurtured and not hurried. It offers ideas which can be adopted immediately.

The book also contains equally detailed and thought-provoking sections on: *Developing appropriate home-school partnerships* (Jennifer Little and Janet Meighan), *Questions of quality* (Tony Bertram and Christine Pascal); *Integration: children of all abilities working together in an inclusive classroom* (Shannon Lee Fletcher); *Initial teacher education* (Philip Gammage); and *The continuing professional development of early childhood educators: planning contexts and development principles* (Chris Day).

Fundamental concepts supported and developed by Education Now can be seen throughout this book, at perhaps the most important level of education, in a child's foundation years. We see, for example, alternative forms of assessment (e.g. portfolio collections), significant parental involvement, democratic practice, and so on. Furthermore, the proposals in this book are not only relevant to early childhood education, but could be beneficially translated to any level of schooling.

Early Childhood Education takes the whole debate forward, with enough detail and complexity to inspire anyone already familiar with early childhood issues, and enough clarity and definition to encourage those whose concern is more recent.

Anne Mills

Mothers Know Best is a radical, new monthly publication which aims to support mothers in having the 'courage' to trust their 'natural instincts'. Although it is recognised that, at times, mothers need help and guidance, they also need to be able to question beliefs and advice given by 'the experts' when making decisions appropriate for their family. Whilst the bond between mother and child is emphasised, together with the understandings which develop from this, *Mothers Know Best* is also for fathers (and other family members).

On first acquaintance, the publication's catchy title, *Mothers Know Best*, gains one's attention. It is, however, provocative in both implying that the mother's role is more significant than the father's, and that mothers have little to learn from others. (Many of us know of families where mother does not always know best.) It is only on reading the wide variety of articles that this first impression is modified.

Mothers Know Best aims to provide a network for both mothers and fathers to communicate their experiences, as well as including contributions written by a range of people with specific expertise. The ideas and issues covered relate to health, play, development, learning, and communication. Topics on health so far include breast feeding, bed-wetting, ear infections, sore throats and tonsillitis, eye problems, fever and hyperactivity, whilst ideas relating to learning and education include Kumon Maths, dyslexia, home-schooling and flexi-schooling, bullying at school and class size (small is best). Other issues examined range from working mothers to 'Should we keep up the lie about Santa?'

Regular contributors include Mildred Masheder writing on the importance and aspects of play; Tim Kahn on his thoughts and experiences of being a father; contributory editor Deborah Jackson on aspects of child development and joint editors Bryan Hubbard and Lynne McTaggart writing the editorials and some major articles.

The first issues of this journal are to be commended. The writing is direct and stimulating. In supporting fathers and mothers it achieves a good balance between communicating parents experiences and providing useful information and advice. The journal is firmly in favour of a living grass-roots form of democracy that opposes the domination by the experts and their institutions. The editors believe that the experts are merely the enablers and play a subordinate role to parents. In their words, "If you believe that is right you will love *Mothers Know Best*."

Janet Meighan

Mothers Know Best is available only on subscription at £24. 95 for 12 issues from, *Mothers Know Best* Office, 4 Wallace Road, London N1 2PG.

Database of Complementary, Alternative and Other Educational Providers

John Siraj-Blatchford is compiling a database of providers of alternative or complementary education for use by Education Now. Many readers will have contacts that should be included.

Please send details of type of provision, numbers involved and a contact name and address to:

John Siraj-Blatchford Tel/Fax: 0171 607 9647

The Trailblazers ... part five ... Nel Noddings

Email: john20@uel.ac.uk
(or the Education Now Office)

Mothers Know Best

Who is Nel Noddings? Currently her title is *Lee Jacks Professor of Child Education at Stanford University*. Recently she served as Acting Dean of the School of Education. Her career includes a period as a philosopher, as a mathematics teacher, and as a former director of the Stanford University's Teacher Education Programme. Nel Noddings is a mother, a grandmother, and a compassionate and caring person. She believes that first and foremost, education should nurture the growth of competent, caring, loving people. This can be accomplished, Noddings asserts, through a curriculum organised around centres of care: centres that feature care for oneself; for intimate others; for global society; for plants, animals, the environment, for the human-made world, and for ideas.

Nel Noddings has developed and elaborated on these ideas through many articles and in her major works, which include:

- *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. (1992) Teachers' College Press.
- *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethnic and Moral Education*. (1984) University of California Press.
- *Awakening the Inner Eye: Intuition Education*. (with Paul Shore) (1984) Teachers' College Press.
- *Women and Evil*. (1984) University of California Press

Her colleagues and admirers maintain that Noddings characterises each child as a person with unique talents, abilities and interests in need of engagement and development by caring teachers. Her educational philosophy conveys a picture of schools as a very large family demanding attention and caring. She asks educators to think of their students as their very own children; seeing them as unique individuals that they care about and want to help become confident and competent persons. She believes students should be encouraged to cultivate their strengths in an environment of caring, not one of vicious competition, as so often our schools exhibit. Noddings points out that traditional liberal education, with its emphasis on verbal and mathematical skills, originally based on how people sought to educate the rich, is elitist and misguided. As an educator she tries to respond to these traditionalists by using strong philosophical arguments drawn from numerous examples in her own teaching experiences and her roles as parent and grandparent.

In a recent article Nel Noddings wrote that we should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement; we will not achieve even that meagre success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and can learn to care for others. As a feminist, a philosopher, the model of a deeply caring educator and humanist, Nel Noddings certainly personifies the "trailblazer".

The first two extracts that follow are from Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (1992) New York: Teachers College Press. The third is from *Teaching Themes of Care*, Phi Delta Kappa, May 1995, p.679

The traditional organisation of schooling is intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society. We live in an age troubled by social problems that force us to recognise what we do in schools. At a time when many thinkers in many fields are moving toward post modernism - a rejection of one objective method, distinctive individual subjectivity, universalizability in ethics, and universal criteria for epistemology - too many educators are still wedded to the modernist view of progress and its outmoded tools. Too many of us think that we can improve education merely by designing a better curriculum, finding and implementing a better form of instruction, or instituting a better form of classroom management. These things won't work. We need to give up the notion of an ideal of the educated person and replace it with a multiplicity of models designed to accommodate the multiple capacities and interest of students.

I have argued that education should be organised around themes of care rather than the traditional disciplines. All students should be engaged in a general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, and the environment, the human-made world, and ideas. Moral life so defined should be frankly embraced as the main goal of education. Such an aim does not work against intellectual development or academic achievement. On the contrary, it supplies a firm foundation for both. (p. 173-4)

On the curriculum:

Some of the best planning for curriculum and instruction that I have observed has been at the nursery-kindergarten level. Here teachers work together to create and gather resources, plan options for development growth, and allocate tasks so as to capitalise on their own individual strengths. At the high school level, this kind of planning is almost unheard of, but it can be done ... The planning necessary for a general education - the centres of care - is even more difficult. Here curriculum will be co-operatively constructed by teachers and students. Teachers will have to predict what students may want to study. Some money will have to be set aside for midyear allocation to resource that could not be ordered ahead of time. Patterns of spending will shift from an emphasis on textbooks to one on paperbacks, kites, charts, tools, art implements, excursions, and museum mini courses. (p. 176.)

Today many educators are calling for smaller schools and more family-like groupings. These are good proposals, but teachers, parents, and students should be engaged in continuing discussion about what they are trying to achieve through the new arrangements. For example, if test scores do not immediately rise, participants should be courageous in explaining that test scores were not the main object of the changes. Most of us who argue for caring in schools are intuitively quite sure that children in such settings will in fact become competent learners. But, if they cannot prove their academic competence in a prescribed period of time, should we give up caring and on teaching them to care? That would be foolish. **There is more to life and learning than the academic proficiency demonstrated by test scores.**

Letters to Education Now News and Review should be sent to **Education Now Office, 113, Arundel Road, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham, NG9 3FQ**. Several of the following letters are begging replies ...

"Donald Soper said to me recently, 'If you are a pacifist, be overt. That is the only way that pacifism will spread'. I am a Council Member of the Peace Pledge Union with effect from May this year as a result of his advice.

I feel very strongly that the Education Now Statement of Purpose must contain a paragraph about peace education and conflict resolution. I also wonder if it would be possible for Education Now to be a pacifist organisation. Your comments would be greatly appreciated."

Arthur Acton

"It is always heartening to read News and Review and to find one's values, dreams and aspirations shared by others in cogent and passionate articles. So many of us ploughing in these stony fields! There is a clear commitment to justice, equality and creativity for all children.

And yet I'd like us to engage in more discussion about how to create learning structures (let's substitute that for schools for the moment) to accommodate the educational, physical and psychological needs of the materially poor. I refer to the materially poor - inner-city and rural - in this country and others of the industrial North (including Eastern Europe) and in the South (the continents of Africa, South America, large parts of Asia and, in terms of structural development, also areas of Eastern Europe). I'm wondering about 'basic education'. We'd all agree that the purposes of education are to liberate and empower the individual to achieve her/his potential and we'd also all agree that literacy and numeracy are uncontested necessities in this process.

I feel I'd like those of us concerned about democracy in education to explore how a society provides the indispensable entitlements of literacy and numeracy to each and every child, including those living in circumstances of material poverty. This may entail dealing with inadequate nourishment and accommodation as well, possibly, as insufficient support and motivation in learning. How do we, as a global society, nurture all our children? At one level, how do we translate Californian models (like the one described in the last issue) to Albania and, equally importantly, populist principles (such as the Nicaraguan project of the 1980s of 'Each one, teach one') to California? Let's have the educational philosophies of Southern thinkers such as Gandhi, Nyrere and Freire included in our canons.

At the heart of these questions is one of how we meet the needs of a mass society in a non-mass, individual way, staying loyal to principles of justice, equality and individual creativity? Any thoughts?"

Miriam Moscovitch Steiner

World Studies Project, School of Education,
Manchester Metropolitan University

"Thank you for publishing (in *News and Review Number 10 Feature Supplement*) the article on flexi-time schooling. As the author of the paper from which it was taken, I would like to correct a couple of inferences that were not mine.

The article states that schools can arrange flexi-time at will, but that, 'It is only when the parents decide that it is appropriate that flexi-time suddenly becomes resisted'. This is not my experience and would seem to prejudge the majority of schools which might be willing to try out what would be for them a new arrangement. My own experience was one of interest and co-operation at the two schools which I have approached and where my children have flexi-time arrangements.

The paragraph in the article which refers to a gifted mathematician was not mine. I do not promote flexi-schooling in order to 'hothouse' young people. While I recognise that the freedom to learn on one's own, to specialise and move forward at one's own speed may result in exceptional performance, I do not think that at this stage in the liberation of learning it is a useful corollary to focus on. I would rather stress that flexible education can benefit everyone and to encourage all those parents and young people who perceive themselves to be 'ordinary' rather than 'extraordinary' to give it a chance."

Kate Oliver

Advance Notice

**Learning Technology, Science and Social Justice:
An integrated approach for 3-13 year olds**
by John Siraj-Blatchford

This book provides a practical guide to the organisation and implementation of a design, technology and science curriculum for 3-13 year olds. Unlike most books on the subject it illustrates how global perspectives, appropriate technology, ideas of mutual interdependence and social justice can be incorporated into investigative, designing and making activities.

To be published by *Education Now* May 1996
ISBN: 1 871526 25 6 Price: £13.95

An Invitation

"Some of us are getting concerned phone calls from pregnant mums worried about the future education of their unborn children. Those with children already in variety of schools are just as worried. To focus these growing concerns, I am proposing a NEW EDUCATION FORUM, open to all, including youngsters themselves.

Towards this end, I've accepted an invitation to give a talk on Complementary Education. In fact, two talks on two consecutive Mondays. That is, 3rd and 10th June 8.00-9.30 at the Muswell Leaking Arts Centre, 169 Avenue Mews, London, N10 3NN.

*Meetings like these, under the title of **New Education Forum**, could be held at many other venues around the country. Education Now is pleased to back the venture and several meeting rooms have already been offered by Education Now supporters. Initial meetings could create agendas for further action.*

*Please contact me: 63, Abbott Road, Abingdon, Oxford, OX14 2DU (tel. 01235 528028) **Christopher Gilmore***

Developing Democratic Education

A Report on the Education Now/Institute for Democracy in Education Conference, 11th November 1995

The Green Party's Education Policy Group was good enough to part-fund my attendance at this conference. Now I must sing for my supper by passing on to the group some, at least, of my personal highlights.

The keynote speech *Beyond Authoritarian Schooling* by Dr **Lynn Davies** (University of Birmingham) was full of new insights, including:

- **Courtesy** - school pupils are rarely treated with the common courtesies considered to be the right of human beings
- **Numbers** - democracy doesn't require small classes to succeed. Dr Davies has seen democratically-run classes of 70 and authoritarian classes of 15
- **Entitlement and equal opportunities** - the right-wing have hi-jacked these ideas, making them part of an individualistic, sink-or-swim programme which ignores responsibilities and mutual support
- **Resistance to democracy within schools** - why? This needs investigation
- **Performance indicators for democracy in schools** - we should be able to "see democracy at 100 yards" and see development over time (Dr Davies presents a provisional set of such indicators in the 'book of the conference', *Developing Democratic Education*, Clive Harber ed., 1995, Education Now Books)
- **Democracy is** - the opportunity to challenge and change the way things are done: it should be transparently clear how to participate
- **Where does democracy start?** Can it be imposed? Or can it be produced by 'white-anting' (nibbling away from underneath)?

This last question was partly answered by **Lesley Browne** in her workshop *Democratising Classrooms*. Lesley teaches in a comprehensive school run on authoritarian lines. She is nibbling away at this structure in one small corner of the curriculum, the A level Sociology group for which she is responsible. (An account of this work can also be found in Clive Harber's book).

So, it seems possible to begin to democratise classrooms and schools, but is it worth the effort? Schools are already on their way out, according to **Roland Meighan** in the final session *Flexischooling and Democratic Education*. The need for mass education has passed, like the need for the town crier and the horse and cart. Subject teachers were necessary once upon a time when there were few books and other resources. Now that at least 30 different learning styles have been recognised and at least seven different types of intelligence described; now that there is increasing need for adaptability in a rapidly-changing society; and more than ever a need for lifelong learning; now that we live in an information-rich society - who needs school? School has become a barrier to information, the National Curriculum being partly to blame.

The discussion following this rousing speech revealed an audience largely convinced by the arguments, but in disagreement about the speed of the envisaged collapse. One boldly prophesied the end of schooling on 28 December 1999 (!), but others felt that schools will be with us long enough to dominate the lives of children for some time to come.

Therefore, any effort towards helping school students to have some control over their own education is worthwhile.

Hazel Clawley

Learning Democracy out of School

Last year one of the parents whose children I help to educate told me that her sons felt constricted by having to study at home all the time. I offered to let them come to my house once a week, to do their studying and get any help they wanted from me.

The idea was taken up enthusiastically by a group of four homeschooled boys who constituted themselves the *Tamworth Learning Collective*. They meet every Monday in my house and spend their time working on whatever happens to interest them.

A group like this works in more than one way. Of course the opportunity to finish projects and to get individual help from me is valuable in itself, but from an educational point of view the experience it offers of democratic life and discipline is probably worth even more.

From the beginning I have always insisted that the group runs itself. The boys are all pleasant and reasonable, so there have been no real conflicts to resolve, but they have taken responsibility for funding themselves and for organising their meetings. I expect to see them develop a wider sense of what people can achieve through co-operation.

I asked them to write an account of their feelings about homeschooling and collective work. I left them to decide what was important to them. The following was their response.

Home education

We all commented that we had freedom to do other things and weren't obliged to do subjects that we weren't interested in. Though the important subjects were made interesting for us e.g. Maths, English, History, Geography, Science, Sports.

Sports

After school hours we meet together to do different activities consisting of swimming, rugby, football and fishing.

Disadvantages

As many home-taught children will say, a big disadvantage is that when you are walking down the street people always question you as to why you are not at school. Another disadvantage is that we meet fewer people of our own age. There is also a lack of sporting facilities.

Other advantages

Our tutor does not require us to wear any uniform, unlike school. Another good thing about being taught at home is that you have one-to-one tuition and there is less pressure when you are unsure.

Christopher Shute, James, Nathan, Aaron and Ben

Home-based education and university choices: one family's experience

Our children both chose home-based education. Jonathan left school in 1979, at the age of 7. His sister Alison was 4 years old when this happened, and she decided not to bother with school.

The years passed pleasantly, without curriculum or timetable. Learning happened mainly through ordinary activities like play, work, outings, reading, TV and conversation. The following extracts from our journal give some flavour of what went on:

18 January 1981 (ages 8 and 5): *library books read by J to A [list of 8 books includes **Hop on Pop** by Dr Seuss and **The Church Mice at Bay** by Graham Oakley]. J works through first part of recorder book. J and A begin to make a book called **The Godsteps** - no one else is allowed to see it yet. J watches **Arena** - the Graeae, disabled people's theatre company.*

18 March 1983 (ages 10 and 7): *Trip to Coventry City Museum - **History of Coventry** exhibition, Toy Museum, Museum of British Road Transport. All in buoyant mood.*

18 May 1985 (ages 12 and 10): *A goes with Charmaine to City Farm. The older girls who organise donkey-rides seem to have involved her as a donkey-walker. Jane and Bob and kids come and we all go to City Farm. I go to Education Otherwise meeting, but no one else wants to come. Everyone busy getting ready for camping trip to Wales. A helps Alan renovate a case, and both children help service the washing machine. Phil and Chris drop in and play a few games. Ann H comes to tea and stays the night.*

July 1987 (ages 14 and 12): *A is busy with the sewing machine, making a toy cat which she has designed with help from a library book on toy design and pattern-making. She is not totally pleased with the result so far. Her capacity for self-criticism (of work) is sound. J is reading mountain books and looking at maps. He devours mountain books at the moment, and is developing a taste for the more literary kind. He has just looked up a couple of Housman's poems, and is talking of trying Mary Webb - both quoted in one of his current library books.*

September 1989 (ages 16 and 14): *A is reading a **Brother Cadfael** medieval whodunnit, is starting work on **Step-by-Step Programming** (Graham) observed closely by J, and making tiny objects using **Making Miniatures** (Dodge). Also working from self-chosen Letts textbooks on History, Geography and Maths. J is following Party Conferences on TV and working on the computer, using magazines like **Format**, **Computer Shopper** and **Scientific American** for inspiration (e.g. using the Metropolis algorithm to solve the 'travelling salesman' problem).*

November 1991 (ages 19 and 16): *A's college courses continue well and are very absorbing [**Fashion Design** at Birmingham Polytechnic; **Fashion History** at East Birmingham College - both part-time], but she finds time for other academic work. She's started reading **QED** (Feynman) again, making notes and going very slowly to understand as much as possible. She keeps a 'question book', jotting down questions (mainly about history) that interest her and that arise in conversation and reading and then trying to find answers. Examples: *Where did the Normans come from originally? Was Latin ever a spoken language in Britain? J is rereading **Godel, Escher, Bach** (Hofstadter) and getting even more from it this time. He's**

supposed to be finding out about Open University courses. Says he'll do it when he's ready.

As soon as the first GCSE syllabuses were published, we consulted them at the library, and even bought some. It was mildly interesting for us all to see what was expected, but the courses themselves were not exciting enough, or close enough to our own interests, to invite any serious attempt to work through them. As parents, Alan and I bore in mind John Holt's attitude to such qualifications - that if and when young people need these pieces of paper, they should be able to take them in their stride, without letting the experience interfere too much with their education.

In fact, that's more or less what happened. In 1991-2, when she was 16, Alison chose, as part of home-based education, to take a Fashion Design course at Birmingham Polytechnic (now the University of Central England). During this year, she decided she would like to do a degree course in Art at university. Although interested in history, her home-based learning experience convinced her that she would be happier following such interests in her own way and her own time, and that the only point in going to University would be to do something practical. The 5 GCSEs necessary to join a Foundation Course in Art were taken at the local FE college. She had had no 'practice' in such disciplines as essay-writing. As far as I know, she had done no 'serious' writing during all the years of home-based learning. But years of talking, arguing and reading were perhaps just as good a preparation, and essays and other written assignments were successfully accomplished. She is now part-way through the first year of a Fine Art degree course at Coventry University.

Jonathan by-passed GCSEs altogether. In 1994, at age 21, he decided he'd like to do an Open University degree course in Computer Studies. He's just successfully completed the Foundation Course in Maths (including his first exam ever) and is deciding which courses to take in 1996. Two things are worth noting. First, how quickly and enjoyably he picked up the basic maths needed before the Foundation Course could be attempted. His maths work up to that point had been very selective - high on such computer-linked areas as different number bases and fractals, and low on simple algebra and geometry. Motivation is everything. Second, the years from about age 19 to age 21 were 'messaging about' years, when serious reading had faltered and there was no very clear direction to learning - or working, or anything very much. But this experience is paralleled by many of his (male) contemporaries, and doesn't seem to have anything to do with home-based education. All one can say is that Jonathan's 'wilderness years' were a lot of fun - home-based learning is a good basis, amongst other things, for enjoyable unemployment.

Hazel Clawley

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Third in the series of practical learning activities

Value Continuum

This values clarification strategy was devised by Sidney Simon to encourage people to express honest views in public. Suitable for groups from 5 to 35 in number.

HOW?

- Arrange the group in a semi-circle. Across the open end of the semi-circle ask people to imagine a line and place a chair at each end.
- Introduce the issue to be discussed (e.g. vegetarianism) and outline two opposing positions. Do this by sitting on one chair and speaking as if you held this extreme view: *"I never ever eat meat. Meat-eating is an abomination - unhealthy, unnatural and uneconomical. I campaign day in and day out to persuade others to give up this immoral habit. A law should be passed banning the eating of meat, on pain of death"*. Then ask someone to sit on the other chair: *"I am a devotee of meat ..."*. (This bit was for demonstration purposes only. Both chairs are now vacated.)
- Ensure that the two views are extreme and balanced - one is not obviously more right (in the leader's eyes) than the other. Explain that everyone's real view will fall somewhere on the sliding scale between the two chairs.
- Explain the rules: *"You choose whether to participate or not. The person who is on the line is guaranteed that her view will be listened to. There will be no agreeing or disagreeing (there will be time for that later) - no reaction, verbal or otherwise at this stage. Honesty is expected"*.
- The leader sits down in the semi-circle with the group and anyone may begin by taking her chair and sitting in a position on the continuum that represents her view. The volunteer is expected to say a few words to the group and then stays in her chosen position.
- The process is repeated, with volunteers going out and speaking one after another. If one person's view is identical to an earlier speaker, she can sit in front of him. The process is likely to come to a natural end.

APPLICATIONS

- To discuss any issue about which there can be polarised, but equally plausible, views:
 - * Religious, Personal, Social, Moral, Political Education
 - * Science: ethical dilemmas e.g. genetics, energy
 - * History: questions of judgement e.g. was Catherine the Great an enlightened despot?
- To assess what members of the group know about a topic before it is begun (*I know absolutely everything there is to know about this topic ... I know nothing at all about it*).
- To evaluate a learning activity (*This was the best possible way we could have learned this topic ... This method was completely useless, it had no merit at all*).

VARIATIONS

- If group members are reluctant to speak in front of the rest, they might just stand in the positions that represent their views.
- When all or most people are 'on the line', you can 'break' the line in half and make two debating teams. The teams face each other (as in Parliament) and take turns to make points. The aim is to persuade people to change sides. In the process of course, the finer points of the arguments will emerge.

Paul Ginnis

The aim of this leaflet is to present homeschooling to a Local Authority official. It was written by a person who spent more than twenty-five years in the classroom, but has also developed a thorough understanding of the practice of home-based education.

A new approach to education

Homeschooling is relatively new. Until about twenty years ago parents who did not send their children to school were seen as social deviants. Society treated them like petty criminals, and they appeared in the Press, if they ever did, in the company of cat-burglars and disorderly drunks.

Nowadays, however, the number of children in the British Isles whose parents do not send them to school is increasing by an average of 100 every month. That is the population of a fair-sized Comprehensive every year. Increasingly, Local Education Authorities find themselves under an obligation to satisfy themselves that they are being educated as the Law requires.

Accountability accepted

That is perfectly proper. Society should protect children from people who want to hurt them, either physically or by cutting them off from valuable knowledge. Homeschooling parents accept that they must answer certain questions about their treatment of their children. If they seem evasive it may be because they fear that the visiting representative of the Authority may ask unreasonable or ill-informed questions, and use their answers to trap them.

A radically different world view

What, then, is the thinking behind homeschooling? Firstly, homeschoolers ask the Authorities to look carefully at the whole history of English schooling, and the culture within which it grew up. Many of the most deep-rooted and powerful assumptions which underlie our national concept of education, and which contribute to the common understanding of it which LEA officials press upon families, have not changed even superficially since universal compulsory education was first set up more than 100 years ago. Laws which were framed to bring an illiterate population of short-lived, down-trodden wage-slaves and peasants into the benefits of an emergent, and not yet securely established, democracy are still being applied to people who are as far removed from those horny-handed sons of toil as they are from Bushmen or Eskimos.

The first generation of school-children, in the 70's and 80's of the last century, had to be compelled to attend school. Many of them would never have been allowed to go if there had been no means to take the decision out of their parents' hands, because

in the economic climate of the time children were an unsustainable luxury if they did not work and contribute to their family's income. Universal schooling in late nineteenth century

Britain had to overcome a prejudice against it born of a canny realisation that, initially at least, the price of learning was likely to be short commons for everybody and an uncertain economic future. This had to be weighed against the possibility that the

children might be able to use their new-found education to earn promotion to a higher social class.

Many parents at that time resisted schooling, and in the end they were prosecuted in order to force them to let their children go to school and receive the only serious education they could hope to get. Today, the same basic ideas inform our school attendance laws. To judge by the tone of their letters Local Authorities still assume that if children in their bailiwick are not at school it is because their parents are exploiting them in some way, or because they are simply feckless and unwilling to allow their children the alleged benefits of schooling.

Yet the world is now a very different place. We no longer let children work as they did a century ago, to help their parents pay their bills. That battle was won a long time ago. Neither do we find that present-day parents are suspicious - as they certainly were a century ago - of the impact education might have upon their own culture. The vast majority of them understand that, however they come by it, children need a variety of knowledge and skills just in order to have enough money to live on when they grow up.

A variety of motives

Why, then, do some of them stop sending their children to school? Every family which decides to homeschool has a unique set of reasons for their action. Some choose home education for strong, well-articulated philosophical reasons. They may believe that mass instruction in large schools injures children by crushing their individual identity, or by subjecting them to a regime which destroys their ability to make good choices for themselves.

Others, probably more numerous, take their children out of school as a response to something which has happened to them there. This may be some kind of physical bullying, or unhappiness caused by their inability to follow lessons, or even because they feel they are being unjustly treated by teachers.

Looking critically at a venerable institution

The role which schools have come to play in our culture has conferred on them a unique right, denied to every other institution except the Army and the Prison Service. It is the right to say to a person under its control: "Although you are being hurt, insulted, brought to despair, and even made mentally ill by being here, you may not leave."

How can it be right for a school to say this? Any suffering they may be going through is entirely the consequence of other peoples' decisions, taken on their behalf, but usually without consulting them. This leads to a kind of subjection which is only tolerable in a humane society if one genuinely believes one or more of the following:

- Children do not really suffer in the normally accepted sense of that word when they are physically hurt or put under mental or emotional pressure. and/or
- Schooling is so valuable and important to children that no adverse reaction, however strong or distressing, can be allowed to prevent them going through it. and/or

- The hardships children suffer in school are valuable because they give them an insight into the sort of difficulties they will have to endure when they grow up.

Homeschoolers do not believe these things about children. They recognise that even adults can become desperate and fall into deep depression when surrounded by tasks they cannot easily do and by people who frighten them. They figure that if stress and mental anguish harm adults, a fortiori they can devastate children. Therefore they take them out of school, to protect them as they would protect them from any other assault on their still fragile personalities.

The school must justify itself to all its clients

By acting in this way homeschooling parents are not trying to undermine schools, or to attack the system in any more general way. They understand that according to the prevailing tradition in this country schooling is right for children under all circumstances. However, they feel that when schools appear to hurt their children it is for the schools to explain and justify themselves, to the children as well as the parents, not for these latter simply to cave in and accept the unacceptable.

Academic difficulties also cause pain

Some parents homeschool not because their children are being bullied or oppressed but because of the work the school expects them to do. Many children, even if they stay in school, find that in some subjects at least, they reach a stage where they are effectively marking time, coming to class but learning nothing. This happens frequently in modern languages, for example (my own subject), when the teacher has to assume that pupils know very many more words, and much more grammar than they actually do. Weaker pupils, faced with the necessity of doing homework and trying to write exercises in class without even a basic grasp of what they are required to do, are tempted to get pat answers from stronger pupils, or to use well-known stratagems to throw the teacher off the scent. This often gets them into trouble, compounding their problems to no good purpose.

Some parents choose to homeschool their children when they reach this point in a significant number of subjects, because they feel that the daily charade they have to play as they go from class to class learning nothing and slipping ever deeper into conflict with the school's regulations, represents an unacceptable danger to academic, psychological and emotional development.

School is NOT a character-building assault course

Inevitably, these parents have to answer critics who suggest that children need to learn how to deal with difficult, demanding challenges by taking them up and making the best of them, and school is the best place to do that. Indeed, some parents report that Authority visitors regard this argument as unanswerable, and expect to hear no more about homeschooling after using it.

For that reason, homeschoolers feel they need to argue very strongly against the idea that schooling is, at least in part, a sort of toughening process - *the Army for kids*, as John Holt put it. They assert forcefully that schools do not exist to toughen or challenge children, and that when pupils do not understand their lessons the school has a responsibility to help them until they have grasped them. If schools see this as inconvenient, and avoid their duty by claiming that the children fail to learn because they are lazy, homeschoolers believe that the schools are at fault, not the children.

After all, teachers are professionals. They receive a salary on the understanding that they know things about the needs of children which non-teachers don't know. Society assumes that they are better placed to assess and comment on children's behaviour than parents. Therefore we are all entitled to expect that teachers will at least make children feel more confident and more able to learn as a result of their work. When the opposite seems to be happening, when children become convinced that they cannot learn any more, and especially when they report that they have asked a teacher for help and *been shouted at*, the time may well have come for responsible parents to think about opting out.

Immunity from criticism = mortal danger

This happens in part because after more than a century of well-nigh universal influence schools have become largely immune to either criticism or serious examination of their real effect on pupils. As representatives of the society which created schooling, and which sustains it with all the concentrated power of the State, Local Authority officials naturally identify their purposes with those of the schools they serve. When parents level criticism at the schools their children attend officials sometimes react by discounting the very basis of that criticism. They say things like: *"Every kid says that about school. You shouldn't take them too seriously. They need to learn that life is hard. School is just a microcosm of the adult world. If they can't survive in school, how on earth do you expect them to make their way when they grow up?"* - and more in the same vein.

Homeschooling parents wish to say very clearly that their relationship with their children, and their aspirations for their future forbid them - they say it with respect, but also with determination - to accept this crude, inhumane and radically over simplistic principle of education. What then, do they propose to put in its place?

The homeschooling alternative

Homeschoolers do not share a common global belief about children, but generally speaking they agree on one thing: youngsters learn best when they are interested in what they learn. Not only do they get new knowledge more easily, but they retain it more securely. Therefore, parents who homeschool assume that their children will continue to learn, and to prepare themselves for adult life. Homeschooled children tend to become MORE willing to learn, MORE enthusiastic about study, and MORE positive about the future.

Yet officials are entitled to ask a serious question: if children are not in school, how can they meet 'teachers', who know more about the wide range of subject-areas they need to study than their parents do? How can parents, who may not even be educated to present-day secondary school standards, give their children access to valuable knowledge?

The writer has never met a homeschooling family which turned to homeschooling without agonising over their ability to meet their children's needs. Often it is only when their sense of desperation about their youngsters' problems at school reaches a humanly unendurable point that they decide, against all their culturally biased instincts, to shoulder the burden of finding and teaching information which they have never needed before. Nonetheless, the question has to be answered, and answered convincingly, lest homeschoolers become seen as backwoodsmen.

Homeschooling parents often inform themselves about homeschooling by reading books by such educators as John

Holt, Ivan Illich, Carl Rogers, Roland Meighan, and even the present author, which challenge the very notion that compulsory teaching leads to learning. Officials may need to read some of these books if they have not done so recently, in order to understand and react sympathetically to homeschooling parents.

Children are not what adults say they are

The idea which lies at the core of this approach to education is that children are not what schools assume they are. Schools base much of their action on the premise that children are incompetent, both socially and intellectually. If one looks closely at the detailed organisation of most English schools one may feel compelled, albeit reluctantly, to accept the general truth of this.

School - a manipulative environment

Schools receive children at the age of five into an environment in which they must do as adults tell them, when those adults choose to issue instructions. They may be allowed to learn freely for a short while, but as soon as it becomes possible to hold connected conversation with them their teacher will begin to make them study formally. No-one will ask them whether they are interested in the curriculum, or whether the problems they may encounter in following it cause them to suffer. They will have to learn how to adjust their appetite for learning to the exigencies of a time-table worked out by adults to meet their need to employ teachers during something like office hours.

They will be brought under a system of discipline in which many behaviours which form part of their natural response to the world around them - talking, running, shouting - become 'naughty', and therefore punishable at arbitrary times. They may even find themselves in trouble because their parents have not made sure they are wearing certain items of clothing. Because schools are run for the convenience of adults they are a minefield of half-understood restrictions which oppress some children in a way which only those who remember their own childhood vividly can understand.

Of course, schools are often more 'child-friendly' now than they were forty years ago. The shame of corporal punishment has gone, and there is a superficially child-referenced culture in many schools, particularly primary schools. Yet anyone who has ever tried to defend a child against some agency of the school with which that child has come into conflict will know that the first concern of the school is usually that the children should not 'win'. They should not be allowed to establish the justice of their position against that of the adults involved.

A very different view of children

Homeschoolers tend to think that treating children as if they are, either potentially or in fact, dangerous and incompetent, does great harm, both to the children themselves and to the general tone of the society they will help to create. They assert, respectfully but strongly, that much of the internal ethos of schools reflects not the true character of the young people who attend them, but rather the unacknowledged but potent influence of adult priorities. These include a need to specify and control everything which happens in the school; the lurking fear that the children will realise the power inherent in their numbers; a diffuse sense of being responsible for moulding the next generation so that it conforms to established folkways; and particularly, a conviction that education is a service to parents,

not to children, and that it must correspond to what parents recall of their own schooling.

Many homeschoolers believe the view of childhood embodied by the authoritarian model of education to which most schools adhere, is simply false. Indeed, they feel it may even be dangerous because it thwarts the positive, fearlessly curious way in which children naturally relate to their surroundings. If this is true, and homeschoolers have a multitude of reasons for believing it is, removing children from school becomes an essentially responsible act.

How homeschoolers work

Fired by the vision of a truly child-centred education, many homeschooling parents choose to trust their instincts, and let their children organise their own learning. They reason that children have already shown themselves to be capable of learning difficult skills merely by being exposed to adults who have them, and they only need to have access to knowledge and the opportunity to study in order to grow into fully competent adults. The homeschooling movement can point to many people who have done precisely that with admirable results.

Other parents feel unable to step back from their children and give them a completely free hand. They teach their children the things they happen to know, and turn to other resources for the subjects they cannot teach themselves. Since anyone who can read can get information from a book, it is often enough for them to provide transport to the local library. Some use distance learning materials provided by commercial tuition agencies. Some engage tutors for subjects which their children hope to learn seriously.

An understandable reservation

Officials may feel that although homeschooling parents may be convincing as idealists and humane educators, they still cannot be relied on to prepare their children for the 'real' world of work and adult responsibility. Few of them use or even refer to the National Curriculum. They do not necessarily enter their children for the usual range of GCSE subjects. In any case, GCSE, which most people outside the homeschooling movement regard as a more or less essential exam, is a firmly school-based qualification. Surely they must go to school and get it? Homeschoolers find, consistently, that their children seem to operate in a rather different way. Sometimes they choose to scout round the GCSE entirely and get vocational qualifications at FE College. Other children do basic GCSE subjects by distance learning and enter themselves externally. They rarely waste time: there is too much to be done, and they are eager to do it.

Some, particularly those whose parents are themselves practising craftsmen, learn their parents' skills by direct experience, and go on to make a career for themselves using those skills. Because they have plenty of time to learn, and are not distracted by timetables and subjects which do not interest them, they often become serious craftsmen themselves at an age when many other children are just leaving school and thinking about getting trained.

A special case: the traveller community

A small number come from the traveller community. Among traditional gypsies and those who have adopted a similar style of life, schooling meets few of the real needs which their children have at any stage of their careers. Traveller children also become the target of racist insults, and frequently find that

the schools they attend either cannot or do not care to address themselves to this problem.

Since they have the freedom to move on whenever the Authorities start to impose schooling on children who do not want it, travellers tend to feel that school is an inconvenience which may benefit their children marginally by giving them some grasp of reading and writing, but which they are entitled to move away from if the need arises because it offers them little else that they can use in their community.

Travellers may not conform very closely to current ideas about education, but they rarely fail to prepare their children for the life they will lead. The traditional pursuits of the travelling community - dukkering (fortune-telling), clothespeg or 'lucky' heather selling - are less productive now than in the past, so many traveller families have turned to more modern avocations, such as tarmac-laying, scrap-metal collection and tree-surgery. They assert that this is a useful way of life, and one which their children will take up in due course if they show them how. They insist that their children do not suffer from being brought up in their traditional ways, without schooling; that their culture, although entirely oral, is as complex and worthy as house-dweller culture; and that the education they give to their children, in passing on their traveller knowledge and expertise, is as 'valid' as schooling, and must be respected as such.

It is impossible to describe in detail every variety of homeschooling. Every family works in a slightly different way. The most important thing to establish is that out-of-school education can succeed, and that the children who go through it benefit immensely from being allowed to learn at the speed which suits them the things which truly grip their interest.

Homeschoolers value their children immensely, and enjoy their company. They have no ambitions to change the way other children are educated, or to indulge in agitprop for any political or religious position. Through the homeschooling movement, notably Education Otherwise, the national support group for home educators, they have gained ample evidence that their methods can work extremely well.

Social mis-education

Homeschoolers often face the criticism that by taking their children out of school they are depriving them of something called 'social education'. At an earlier point in this pamphlet it was stated that homeschoolers take a high view of their children's right to be protected from abuse and treated with the respect usually accorded to adults. It is in this context that homeschoolers challenge the idea that what happens in school playgrounds and classrooms can properly be called 'social' anything, least of all 'education'.

'Social' implies freely-chosen, amicable relationships, knit together by an organic solidarity growing out of common interests and endeavours. Very little that goes on in school satisfies that definition. Schoolchildren are where they are because others have put them there. Adults divide them up into groups by an arbitrary process which takes little account of their choice of friends. Schools are organised so that during much of the day communication with companions is limited or simply not allowed. Break-times, because they are short and therefore fairly turbulent, give little opportunity for sustained, sensitive relationships.

Whether a particular school tries to deal with bullying or simply pretends that it doesn't happen, a proportion of its pupils will always be forced to live with some fear, of the size and number of the other pupils, if of nothing else. The pupil-group

commonly puts pressure on children to conform to its often neurotic and pitiless culture of reaction to Authority. This conformity may include experimenting with tobacco, drugs and sex in an atmosphere of covertness.

The home is the natural centre of social education

In contrast, homeschooling families allow their children to make close relationships with a manageable number of other youngsters and adults in safe conditions. Schools base their attempts at socialisation on the premise that fitting into a large group is a skill which everyone needs to acquire early, and that all the conflicts and competitive relationships attendant on large-group experience are valuable in themselves. If homeschooling parents disagree it is not because they are shortsighted or sentimental: rather, they have observed what happens in school playgrounds, and try as they might, they can see no virtue or positive value in it at all. In fact, they suspect very strongly that the only reason why teachers claim to believe in the therapeutic value of mass-socialisation is that, in dealing with children in large groups over the last hundred years, they have acquired the habit of deeming everything they do in school, however mundane and unrelated to the children's intellectual and emotional needs, to be 'educational'.

Consequently, many homeschooling parents feel dispensed from the need to give priority in their social provision for their children to cumbersome large-group experiences. They have found that their youngsters mature quite adequately among a small group of friends with whom they have had a chance to form deeper relationships. If they need to make a larger circle of companions they arrange to do so in their own way. Not having been forced to take their place in the often spiteful and over-competitive community of the playground and classroom, does not, in the writer's experience, lead to their failing to develop social skills. Instead they become impressively self-confident, self-critical and sociable.

Homeschooling puts children in control of their environment. They no longer have to expend their energy on compensating for their almost total lack of influence over their own lives. They usually develop flexibility and adaptability. Imagination, ingenuity and creativity are encouraged and found to develop frequently. They become what every employer will want them to be: clear-sighted, honest and realistic.

Chris Shute

