

Speech on The Home education conference in Germany 29. of April:

What's special about home educating families?

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Abstract

The impression is often given that parents need to be somehow exceptional, in terms of professional and subject knowledge and even personality, to make a success of home education. Yet research emanating from both home education and school education suggests that simply being a parent, in the way that our society already understands that concept, is what enables children to learn. This talk explores the evidence of what home educating parents actually do and also considers the chances we have of aligning ourselves with some of the main stream research that investigates how best to support children's learning.

What's special about home educating families?

My title today is "what's special about home educating families?" and I want to use that title to explore two different themes. Firstly I want to share with you my conviction that home education is a practical, viable alternative for any family that wants to undertake it. And secondly I want to consider the possibilities for advancing understanding and acceptance of home education by building on what we know about learning through research conducted in and about schools. Very often the debate is set up as a home vs school confrontation but this may not always be the most helpful way forward for home educators. I'll be able to explain this more clearly in a bit with some research pertinent to the main theme of families.

Firstly though, to the role of parents in home education. Understanding the role of parents is a central issue to not only the success of home education as an individual enterprise but also to gaining a clearer understanding of how learning can and does take place within the home. For parents as individuals, it can also be an angst ridden issue. Whilst Alan and I were talking to home educating families as part of our research one mother said to me that she felt that the biggest barrier to home education, in a country where it is fully legal, was lack of confidence on the part of parents. It was a view born out and graphically illustrated by another mother who described how it took her a whole year to work up the courage to take her desperately unhappy child out of school. She knew about home education, wanted to do and yet felt that she could not, that she did not dare to. When you look at public perceptions of home educating parents it is not hard to see why people feel intimidated.

When people start talking about home education their first question to the home educating parent is very often "are you a teacher?" Sometimes they don't ask that directly but they put the same point in a different way by asking, "how do you manage science at home?" or "You must need to do a lot of preparation!" or "I couldn't do that – I

can't remember enough school maths!". I think of this type of remark as being about our professional capabilities as home educators – do we know enough of the right things ourselves, are we good enough teachers. The second type of remark commonly made is about the personal resources of home educating parents. People often say, "You must be very patient!" or "you must be very brave!" or "my children would never listen to me all day long!" or even, "I couldn't stay at home all day long with my kids – I'd go mad!" These are the kinds of remark that suggest that to home educate you need some special personal attributes and strengths. Now these types of comment are perhaps quite understandable first reactions when they come from someone that you happen to have just met at a party or a bus stop or whatever, but they actually go quite a long way up in the hierarchy of commentators on home education. Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers commented in the Guardian a couple of years ago that, "It would be a rare parent who can cover all the subjects in the national curriculum and ensure that they have all the right equipment and resources at home". Kate Ashley writing in the same piece says "the mere thought of spending 24 hours a day with the kids would be enough to put many people off". Together these remarks imply that to home educate successfully parents need to be something other than ordinary parents; they need knowledge and personal resources that probably most parents don't have.

Our own approach to the role of parents was not so much to ask what are home educating parents like in the sense of who are they, what educational experiences and attainments do they have themselves, but rather we wanted to know what do home educating parents actually do all day long? If you take the roof off a home educating household for the day and look inside, what are you going to see parents doing? We were asking the question specifically about families who are informal in their approach and do not attempt to directly teach their children anything for all or most of the time but I think you will see that the answers and conclusions that we came to are of relevance to all home educators, and indeed all families, no matter what their approach to education.

We found that parents did four things. They lived their own lives, they helped children to live their own lives, they and their children shared their lives, and parents had expectation of and aspirations for their children. Let's look at these things in more detail.

Parents lived their own lives. Home educating parents are of course, not just home educating parents. They are also people with many and varied duties, responsibilities, relationships and interests of their own. They are friends, neighbours, members of communities, citizens of countries and they have all the obligations and rights that go with this. They run the family home from cleaning to managing the finances, they shop, garden, cook, deal with all sorts of agencies from the bank to the doctors to the man next door. They take part in community meetings, go to church, vote in elections and so on. They have interests and hobbies, take part in sports, join clubs and have social lives of their own. Now parents don't do any of these things in order to teach their children or even to show them how the world works but when parents and children live in close, day to day contact as happens in home educating families the effect is that children receive an on going demonstration of what it means to be an adult in our society. What adults need to know, what they need to be able to do, how they behave is something to which

children at home are constantly exposed. And incidentally, that would include so called intellectual skills such as literacy and numeracy. One way of looking at this type of situation would be to see those children as being apprenticed to their parents. They are exposed to adult lives and have the opportunity to learn and to join in in a very natural way. Some of the parents commented on this, particularly with regard to household chores. They expected children to begin contributing through this type of apprenticeship and we can make a parallel here with children in other cultures growing up without schooling, where children begin from a very early age to contribute to the household through this type of spontaneous apprenticeship.

Secondly parents helped children to live their own lives. Parents provided their children with access to their wider environment and culture and gave them the means to explore these. Parents took children out to parks and swimming pools, libraries, museums, places that they thought children would enjoy. They introduced them to the extended family, to interest groups and other children. They gave them access to the things that adults use to understand, control and explore their environment so pens, pencils, paper, pocket money, tv, books, clocks, money, kitchens to cook things in, gardens to grow things in and so on. The parents of older children often specifically described themselves as facilitators. One mother said, “they come to me if they need something or I will open doors for them in some way or other” and that was typical of how parents saw themselves enabling their children to follow up their own interests and live their own lives.

Thirdly, parents and children shared their lives together. As I’ve already said, in home educating families parents and children spend a lot of time together. They work together, play together, talk together, make plans together. Very often they shared interests that began in one of the first two categories. One mother described how she and her daughter could spend all day together; they were both interested in art and music and could spend hours together pursuing their mutual hobbies. Another mother described how her son had become heavily involved in on-line computer games, so she had started to play too, because she wanted to understand his fascination with them. Nearly all the parents emphasised the amount of talking and reading that they shared with their children.

And finally, parents held expectations of and aspirations for their children. Parents saw their children as interesting, capable, talented people. They believed in their abilities and believed in their capacity to both take what they needed from their environment in order to learn and in their ability to give back to their society. It was very interesting to note that parents sustained these beliefs more or less no matter what their children were doing. I can only imagine that if your child is in school and is not doing very well it must be very difficult to keep this kind of faith. For the home educating parents, even in situations where children were below school standard, for example in the many cases of “late” reading, this did not present a difficulty. Parents still saw their children as infinitely capable and often said things like, “he’ll be able to do whatever he wants in life”. The practical sum of these beliefs is, as one parent put it, “this is probably the way his life will continue to go, he probably won’t consider that he needs to hesitate before he jumps in and it sound dangerous as if they’ve got no cares at all but of course they have, of

course they learn to be cautious but they don't learn those personal boundaries that make people say, "I don't know whether I can do that", they don't learn those."

Now these four things sound very nice don't they? But they are not particularly special things. In fact, isn't this just what we expect of families? We expect family members to be interested in each other, to help each other out if they can, to want good things for each other and if they don't do these things then we tend to consider those families to be dysfunctional. So this is very ordinary family behaviour. How does it measure up as an educational environment? Well, I think many people would respond to that question by wanting to know more about the child. As a society we accept and expect, indeed we know that babies and small children learn prodigious amounts in just such an environment. What about older children – say a 5 year old, 10 year old, 13 year old? As children get older people tend more and more to consider that this would simply not be a sufficient environment for learning to successfully continue. So how valid is the belief that the support for learning needs to change?

I want to turn now to some other research and this is also the time to return to the point I made earlier about using main stream research to support arguments for home education. The research in question is that undertaken by two British researchers: Desforges and Abouchar. Now, these two were not interested in home educated children. Rather they were interested in children in school and they wanted to know what the differences are between children who do well in school and children who don't do so well. This is by no means a new question, so instead of carrying out yet another piece of research Desforges and Abouchar conducted a literature review of pertinent research already undertaken. Their strategy was to compare the results of as many English language academic papers pertaining to achievement in school as possible and to look for common conclusions in order to pinpoint what determines children's achievement in school. The results of their review showed, very clearly, that the main factor effecting children's achievement levels in school is what children do at home! Desforges and Abouchar themselves offer the following summary, " the most important finding from the point of view of this review is that parental involvement in the form of "at home good parenting" has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation". And it is important to note that "all other factors" includes the quality of school! So what exactly do they mean by this crucial "at-home good parenting"? Well, they are not talking about families' social class or financial or material resources. They are not talking about parent's educational levels or about out of school coaching or homework help. Their specific description of the type of parental input they are talking about is "provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship".

Now this list does sound remarkably like the four fold answer Alan and I came up with when we asked what do home educating parents do. In that list we've got parents living their own lives in the form of good role models, we've got sharing lives in the form of intellectual stimulation and discussion, we've got high aspirations, there's nothing specific about children's own interests although discussion and intellectual stimulation

would be part of those. Of course when you are considering the lives of children in school they do have much less time in which to pursue their own interests. I think though that there is enough common ground to conclude that we are talking about the same things. Indeed, what Desforges and Abouchaar have provided is a pretty accurate thumbnail sketch of informal home education. One way of looking at what they are saying would be to conclude that these parents are already home educators even though their children go to school. Desforges and Abouchaar go on to conclude that it is this “at home good parenting” that enables children to learn in school but there is a flaw in this in that, despite the wide number of studies they used, all those studies were concerned with children in school. The idea that this made school a crucial part of the learning equation was therefore an assumption. Alan and I were, so to speak, examining the control group by looking at children learning outside school. And our conclusion was, yes this is the parental input needed but we found no evidence to suggest that school or school type input was also necessary. The children we met were learning in their families from precisely this kind of parental input, just as they had from babyhood onwards – there was no need and indeed no evidence to make Desforges and Abouchaar’s assumption that this was not by itself sufficient. The major difference was that home educated children were able to get a lot more of this type of input.

Now this is the kind of research which I feel we, as home educators, should be putting to good use in our quest for greater understanding of home education. It is not just us who knows how important these things are – main stream research knows it too and we need to make use of that common ground. It is much harder to dismiss home educators as a whacky or misguided fringe when we can in fact align ourselves with strong academic research emanating from the main stream about learning.

We started this discussion with a question, which it is now time to get back to, and that was, “what’s special about home educating families?” Well, it may be something of an ego-busting answer but when you take a full and detailed look at what home educating parents do we are forced to the conclusion that there is nothing special about them. Home educating parents do what we expect all parents to do and all parents who do those things are home educators; even if part time ones. For us as a community there really is no better news than that home education is a viable alternative for any family that wants to do it. It is the wanting to do it part that is crucial. Home educating parents have to like their children, want to be with them and share their lives with them; they have to want to be active parents and if they want those things, then the overwhelming chances are that they are already home educators. Taking that a bit further by embarking on full time home education is only an extension of the things that parents do which help children learn anyway and in that knowledge we should all find our confidence.