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School-Aged Children who are Educated at Home by their Parents: is there a role for educational psychologists?

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SUMMARY *This paper reviews the literature on home education with reference to issues that may concern educational psychologists. It notes the fast growing number of families (at present, 1% of the UK school population) who have chosen to educate their school-aged children at home. The great majority of home-educated children are reported to be well adjusted and to be achieving highly. However, samples used to study home education have been self-selected and may not accurately reflect all home education practice. Possible reasons for home education are discussed, as well as the approaches to teaching and learning reported in the literature. Implications are outlined for the work of educational psychologists.*

Introduction

There are various categories of young people who are not immediately 'visible' within the education system. They are either not educated regularly in schools or do not receive education in school at all. They include young people who truant, who are ill, whose families are travelling, who are excluded from school, who are anxious non-attenders, some pregnant school girls, as well as the group of young people with whom this paper is concerned. The way in which this last group differs from the former is that the state is no longer providing their education, which is solely undertaken by their parents. Under section 7 of the 1996 Education Act (previously section 36 of the 1944 Education Act), parents have a duty to ensure that their school-aged child receives 'efficient full-time education, suitable to his age, aptitude and ability, and to any special educational needs that he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise'. They can therefore choose to educate their children themselves. As Meighan (1995) puts it, 'the law is clear: *education* is compulsory, schooling is not'. The term 'suitable education' has been interpreted by the court as one that is such as to prepare children for life in modern civilised society and to enable them to achieve their full potential. To base the legal meaning of 'full-time' on school hours is not considered relevant to home education, which

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generally takes place on a one-to-one basis or in very small groups, in very different conditions.

The local education authority (LEA) only has a monitoring function in respect of such young people, although the majority also see themselves as giving advice. The way these functions are carried out can vary considerably between similar LEAs (Bates, 1996). Sometimes, with a limited education budget, and a more liberal attitude to parents' rights to home education, these are very minimal. Out of 38 LEAs (representing 35% of the possible total) that responded to Bates' questionnaire, only eight saw educational psychologists as part of this monitoring or advisory function. LEAs do not have automatic right of access to the parents' home. All parents need to do is to demonstrate that they are providing a suitable full-time education, when the LEA requests this.

Why Should Educational Psychologists be Concerned with Such Children?

Reasons for this are at a number of levels and will be discussed in more detail later. The first reason concerns equal rights, and the second relates to some of the children having special needs. The third reason is associated with the growing numbers of this group and the possible reasons for this. Finally, teaching and learning at home would seem to be of a different quality to that commonly taking place in school. It is often described as more child directed, with the adult being a learning manager rather than engaged in direct teaching. Learning more about the processes involved in successful home education should inform us about possible teaching approaches to be used with some of the young people failing within the present school system.

Home-Educators also Pay Council Tax

The first reason is associated with the rights of such children and their parents as taxpayers. Educational psychology services should be concerned with providing a service not only to schools, but also to parents (Department for Education and Employment, 2000). The least one can offer to the parents is the same right of access to an educational psychologist as if their child was educated in school. This is especially since LEAs in this country, unlike in some US towns (Harrington-Lueker, 1997), do not fund or resource such parents. No pupil-related money is spent on these young people, which represents a substantial saving for the Government, especially if the numbers are large.

The only available figures (from the United States) indicate that only 1% of parents who were home educators had accessed psychological services (Mayberry, 1993)

There May be a Hidden Need

The second reason for involvement concerns the psychological well-being and educational achievement of the child who is home educated. Research studies, in general, report that such children are socially more well adjusted (Shyers, 1992),

have higher self-esteem (Scheffer, 1995), are more confident and achieve more highly (Ray, 1991; Rothermel, 1999) than their school-educated peers.

However, there must be a big 'caveat' in interpreting such results. First, it is extremely difficult to obtain a representative sample of children (Webb, 1990). If there is one thing that home educators have in common, it is their enormous diversity (Ray, 1991). Typically, data have been gathered through questionnaires (with the usual low response rate pertaining in such surveys; Cohen *et al.*, 2000) or from families who agreed to be interviewed. For both sources, such families are usually found through some formal organisation, such as Education Otherwise (Thomas, 1998). They are therefore likely to be the more highly motivated and better educated of the entire group of home-educating parents, and their children are likely to benefit from such advantages. Surveys of home-schoolers in the USA, which have used methods based on self-selected samples and questionnaire data, indicate that the parents have, on average, greater formal education and a higher family income, and that two-parent families are the norm (Home School Legal Defense Association, 1990). For instance, Webb (1990) found that just over one-half of the 36 parents in her interview sample, which was obtained through personal contacts and from the list of members of Education Otherwise, were teachers or teacher qualified. In Thomas' (1998) and Rothermel's (1999) UK samples, which were obtained in similar ways, 26% and 29%, respectively, were teacher trained. Meighan (1984) states that, at any one time, at least 25% of home educators in this country are members of the teaching profession. Such characteristics may not be typical, however, of all home educators. The question is therefore whether we can rely on the present research to be representative of all parents who educate their children at home. Is it really the case that almost all of these young people are doing well? As far as the author is aware, there has been no research that has used a representative sample of all the home educators that are on the list of an LEA. Even if this was done, it could be argued that such a sample would not include representation from all home-educating families. This is because there is no requirement that parents do inform the LEA or that the LEA keeps what lists they have up to date. For example, Rothermel (personal communication) estimates that up to 40% of the parents in the UK who had responded to her request to complete a questionnaire were not on the official LEA list. We simply do not have an adequate database to assess the needs of these young people and their parents in a systematic way.

A further criticism that can be levelled at the research on home-schooling is that it has been limited by the lack of causal-comparative studies. One could argue that the children of well-educated and highly motivated parents are likely to do well, whether they are educated at home or at school. There has been no conclusive evidence to either support or reject such an hypothesis. What can be said, however, is that there is no research up to date that has sufficiently demonstrated that home-schooling is a great disadvantage for young people.

The literature mentions children with special educational needs who are home educated. For example, there is reference to children having learning difficulties or being disruptive at school (Thomas, 1998) and the fact that many parents of

children with autistic spectrum disorder have opted for home education (Dowty & Cowlishaw, 2002). This raises the question of whether parents should abide by the spirit of the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (Department for Education and Science, 2001) when educating their children at home. All a home-educating parent is asked to do at the moment is draw up a curriculum schedule for their child, but they are not required to do any identification, monitoring or assessment. It is only when the young person has a Statement of Special Educational Needs that the LEA has a duty to review this on an annual basis. The development of Individual Education Plans or consultation with outside agencies is not seen as a feature of home education for children with special educational needs.

Growing Numbers

Another reason why educational psychologists ought to be aware of these children is that there are increasing numbers of parents who are choosing to educate their children at home. This trend is not only the case in the UK, but also in the rest of the world, so that it is now a substantial minority in some countries. The Home School Legal Defense Association (1997) reported that in the USA 900,000 young people were schooled at home, which is a threefold increase since 1990 and represents nearly 2% of the total school-age population. In 2000, this had risen to 1.7 million or 3% (Rhodes, 2000).

In 1977, when the Education Otherwise organisation first started in England, they only had a few members. By 1988 there were 1500 members (Webb, 1990). Bates (1996) reported that the organisation Education Otherwise estimated one-quarter of all families who educated at home, representing 5000 children, were members of their organisation. From the figures submitted by LEAs, Bates extrapolates that in England, in 1996, there were 3602 families who home educate 4768 children. As mentioned previously, this last number is likely to be an underestimate because parents are not obliged to place themselves on the LEA list. If their child is on the roll of a school, all they need to do is to inform the headteacher. Second, if their child has not been on the roll of a school in that LEA because they were pre-school or have moved in from another LEA, they are not obliged to tell anyone.

Meighan (1997), who has done much in the UK to create awareness of home education, suggested that the number of young people receiving home-based education in the UK in 1997 was approaching 50,000. More recent quotes vary from a figure of 85,000 or 1% of the UK population (Home Education UK, 2002) to 140,000 (Furedi, 2002).

The reasons put forward for such growing numbers are varied and will be discussed later.

Reasons for Home-Schooling

Thomas (1998) recognises that there are two different sets of reasons, which are often also associated with different groups of parents: those who never send their children to school, and those who withdraw their children from school. The first

group usually has reasons associated with moral, religious or ideological convictions. For instance, Mayberry (1993), writing about the USA, states that while families have complex motives for home-schooling, a common factor is their desire to maintain or further develop family unity, and to resist the effects of urbanisation and modernisation on the family. The second group, whose children have had some time in school before they are withdrawn, have reasons associated with learning difficulties, disruptive behaviour, bullying and unsatisfactory progress (Thomas, 1998).

Webb (1990) reports on a survey of the main reasons why parents joined Education Otherwise in 1982. These were, in order of frequency:

- Parents did not approve of moral and social attitudes implanted by schools (by far the largest group);
- Parents felt they could do better than schools;
- Alternative lifestyle;
- Problems in school, including bullying, having a bright child, withdrawal of the child, school refusal, 'unacademic' child, the child being unhappy, too few teachers, too little equipment and undesirable attitudes on part of school and school community;
- Religious reasons.

Rothermel (1999) surveyed 36 home-educating families with at least one 4-year-old child in the UK, and found that the most commonly quoted reasons (by more than 15% of parents) were:

- Ideology and/or always intended to;
- Separation concerns for parent and/or child;
- Disappointment with education and school;
- Education is seen as the parent's responsibility;
- School bullying;
- The children are able to work at their own pace and develop their potential.

Possible Factors in the Growth in Home-Schooling

Hargreaves was quoted in the *Sunday Times* (8 June, 1997) as saying that the rapid increase in home education could be due to a number of different factors. First of all, there was growing parental dissatisfaction with traditional education. Parents wished to protect their children from the dangerous influence of schools, the demotivating effects of institutional life, exposure to unsavoury groups, drugs, sex, bullying and delinquency. Second, technological developments in the areas of communication and information should allow better resourcing for home learning. However, the exponential growth in home education was already taking place before the advent of affordable electronic information systems. A further factor pinpointed by Hargreaves was parents' unhappiness at having to move or drive long distances to be near a good school.

Another factor could be the changes in teaching methods as a direct result of the

introduction of national testing. Many primary school teachers have changed to a more didactic style of teaching, instructing pupils rather than encouraging them to find out things for themselves (McCallum *et al.*, 1996). Such changes in style may have had a direct effect on some pupils' happiness in school and, consequently, have led to decisions by their parents to home educate them.

Further research is needed to establish whether the growth in home education indeed reflects a growing dissatisfaction with schooling, either by the parents or by the pupils or by both.

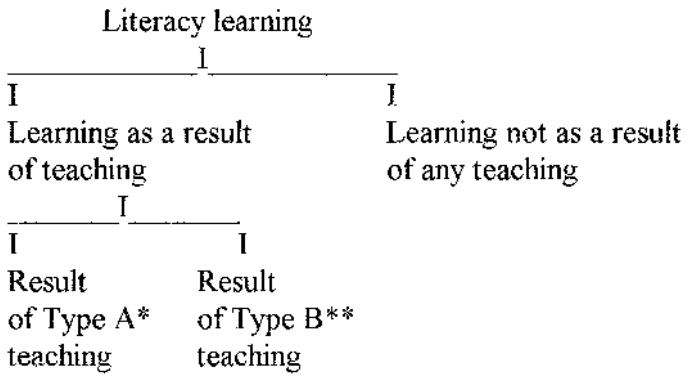
Learning from Home-Based Education

Many authors (for example, Dowty, 2001; Dowty & Cowlishaw, 2002; Mayberry *et al.*, 1995; Thomas, 1998) suggest that there are a number of satisfied users of home education who were at one time fairly dissatisfied with or even disaffected from school. This leads then to the following question: what it is about home-based education that is different from schooling that helps these youngsters to make progress and to be well motivated and happy? Assuming that we can find some answers to this, can we use some of that knowledge to help build better schools for pupils whose parents prefer them to go to school?

Thomas (1998) suggests that one of the key differences between home and school learning is that the former allows individual teaching. While this used to be much advocated for schools, it has become an impossible pipe dream. Each class has about 30 children and only one teacher available to do so. Thomas' work and other literature (Dowty, 2001; Dowty & Cowlishaw, 2002; Meighan, 1997) indicates that it is the opportunity to flexibly adapt the learning environment to the learning styles and learning needs of the child that is a crucial element in the effectiveness of home education. Flexible applications of discipline and a flexible use of time, as well as the more relaxed atmosphere at home, are also named as factors. The child is able to plan, learn and review, and thereby become an independent and confident learner, and the adult becomes the learning manager in this process rather than the teacher (Meighan, 1995).

Home schooling can therefore be an important source for studying how children learn in informal environments (Lines, 1996; Thomas, 1998). Home learning may be of a qualitatively different kind to school learning. Take, for instance, the way children learn to become literate. Some of this learning takes place through the learner's own efforts, while other learning takes place as a result of teaching (Hannon, 1997) (see Figure 1).

This teaching can be of a number of different types, along a continuum that starts with highly directive teaching, which we shall call Type A. This type of teaching, which is typically utilised in schools, is characterised by being structured, purposeful, formal and having a deliberate, conscious method for teaching, often with a distinct time and place set aside for it. Home learning that takes place using such methods includes, for instance, Portage programmes (Hedderly & Jennings, 1987) and Paired Reading (Topping, 1995). Type B teaching is not planned; it is incidental, opportunistic and often embedded in other activities (e.g. 'look there's

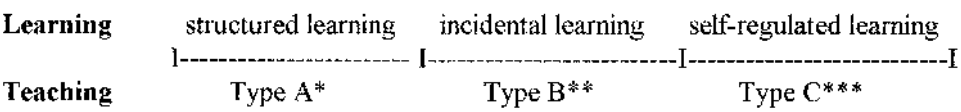


* Type A teaching: structured, purposeful, directive
** Type B teaching: informal, incidental, opportunistic

FIG. 1. Learning and teaching (based on P. Hannon, 1997).

a letter that starts with the same as your name'). It makes use of the fact that children are 'natural' learners; that is, they learn all the time in their efforts to make sense of the world around them (Holt, 1991). This is more typical of the teaching that all parents may do as a matter of course with their children and not only when literacy is a main object. Thomas (1998) found that home-educating parents usually started with Type A teaching, but that they moved to Type B teaching as a result of an individual, interactive process with their children over time. He stresses the crucial part that parents play in this informal teaching process. Thomas states that the most important difference between school and home-based learning is that the latter becomes an interactive process, often involving a 'conversational relationship' (Rowland, 1984) rather than a series of tasks to be tackled. In his study, parents repeatedly referred to 'being able to strike when the iron is hot, to deal with problems as they arise and not going on to something new until the prerequisite knowledge or concepts have been learned' (Thomas, 1998, p. 127; see also Dowty, 2001). The children influenced this style by refusing to attend when they did not understand what the parent was trying to teach them. Thus, when the children got stuck, their parents would not try to push them further than they could deal with. Any mistakes that were made were not seen as failures, but as information on the child's thought processes, and used as such for new learning.

Combining the teaching continuum with the learning continuum would look like Figure 2. Other studies of home-based education suggest that much learning that takes place is of the self-regulated, self-motivated kind (Dowty, 2001) and that this is the reason for the high achievements and well-being of the children involved (Mayberry, 1993). The home-school setting seems to provide children with learning processes emphasising independence, co-operation and an orderly learning environment characterised by warmth and concern. This could be a Type C way of



(based on Hannon, P 1997)

* Type A teaching: structured, purposeful, directive
** Type B teaching: informal, incidental, opportunistic
***Type C teaching: teaching on demand

FIG. 2. The learning and teaching continuum combined.

structuring the learning situation, which encourages such autonomous learning styles. Leistico (1994) calls this 'interest initiated learning', which is based on three principles: (1) the learner initiates and controls learning according to his/her own interests; (2) the student is guided by his/her own priorities; and (3) the teacher only enters the process when invited to do so. This goes one step further than the informal, Type B teaching, in that the parent's presence is still necessary but the initiative is solely with the learner. There could thus be a continuum of parent involvement in the learning process, ranging from totally parent directed and parent planned (Type A teaching) via an interactive process in which the learning targets could be initiated by either parent or child (Type B teaching) to one in which all learning is child initiated, with parents available 'on demand' to support the learning (Type C 'teaching').

Some Tentative Conclusions

Caution needs to be exercised with drawing any firm conclusions from the presented overview of the literature, until more data are available from representative samples of home-educating parents. However, there are a number of issues that already seem pertinent for educational psychologists.

- A growing number of parents are taking the option of home education for their school-aged children. In a number of cases, their reasons for doing so relate to dissatisfaction with their children's experiences in school, which include being bullied, having learning difficulties or displaying disruptive behaviour. Effective early intervention with these children, while still in school, may have prevented their parents from taking the big step of removing them from school altogether. Educational psychologists are well placed to work with schools to support such children and their families.
- Home-educating parents who have children with special educational needs appear to receive little support or advice from other professionals, including educational psychologists. Educational psychology services may wish to explore ways in which such access is increased.
- Teaching and learning during home education are described as qualitatively

different from the processes taking place in school. It may be worthwhile for educational psychologists to research the effects of these approaches further, by introducing this type of teaching and learning for specific children in mainstream schools. This may suit especially those who are not learning well with current approaches or who are disaffected from school. With the increasing employment of Support Assistants and the introduction of Learning Support Units in many schools, such individualised learning may well become more of a reality than has hitherto been the case.

- Educational psychologists should become more involved in the debate about home education. For instance, the notion of flexible schooling (Meighan, 1995; Rothermel, 2000), in which school and home combine to provide a programme of educational experiences for a young person, is worth exploring further. This would allow a combination of the best of teaching inputs to suit individual needs.
- Finally, taking into account the increasing emphasis on life-long learning and the technologically induced shift from schools to the community as a resource for education, it would seem an appropriate time to ask ourselves why educational psychologists tend to continue to see education in schools as the almost exclusive focus of their professional endeavours.

Note

The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of her employing authority.

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