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Too cool for school?
Gifted children and homeschooling

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ABSTRACT

Homeschooling can be a last resort for frustrated families where gifted children are not having their complex needs met through mainstream schooling. Unlike many other groups of homeschoolers, parents of highly able children take this option for pragmatic reasons rather than as a kind of moral stance. This article explores some of the ways that standard schools fail gifted children and presents the perspectives of families who have made the choice to remove their gifted children from the mainstream education system. The difficulties inherent in researching both homeschooling and gifted education are also highlighted.

KEYWORDS *alternative education, gifted, highly able, homeschooling, parents, talented*

THIS ARTICLE CONSIDERS THE CONCERNS OF FAMILIES with highly able children who choose homeschooling over maintained or independent schooling and discusses the specific issues pertaining to this group of homeschoolers, showing how they differ from other users and practitioners. Specifically, I present the case that families with highly able children constitute a distinctive group of homeschoolers, whose reasons for homeschooling are unlike those of other homeschoolers and other critics of public schooling, and that they do not fit the taxonomies of homeschoolers usually deployed by scholars.

I illustrate my argument with quotations from highly able/gifted/talented children drawn from various practice situations. (I am using these terms interchangeably.) Over the last twenty years, I have worked with highly able children in a variety of formal and non-formal settings. Many of these children have been partially or fully homeschooled, and discussion of their

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schooling has been a constant and fascinating feature of our conversations. Once the workshop, activity or lesson is in its stride, I ask participants about their 'normal, everyday' schooling (beyond whatever session I am involved in facilitating). On reviewing the workshops, I keep notes of points made by children with their permission and that of their parents, as appropriate. As well as collating these ideas, I have searched for formal educational research on the homeschooling experiences of the gifted, but have met with very little success.[1]

WHO ARE 'GIFTED CHILDREN'?

It is impossible to give a clear and uncontroversial definition of highly able children because the field itself has singularly failed to produce a definitive way of defining and explaining high ability. Competing ideas leaning towards psychological or sociological evidence contradict one another variously, with genetic, personality or social explanations. But because governments need practical thresholds for the distribution of resources they adopt working definitions. Teachers apply these definitions to help decide which children have access to enrichment activities, or perhaps to help argue for pupils to be accelerated or even released from some aspects of the prescribed curriculum. The current preferred definition of the UK government is:

> Children and young people with one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop those abilities). (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008)

Notice that both *achievement* and *potential to achieve* are included in the definition, despite these being contested. Also note (more significantly) that nothing is said about entitlement to provision. Although this is a statutory definition, no clear official expectation of provision accompanies its use, despite some people arguing that a moral case could be made (Winstanley, 2004). Recommendations apply (such as the Institutional Quality Standards),[2] but schools are not legally obliged to create any kind of individual education plan to support identified needs. It is this issue that drives some parents to remove gifted children from schools and undertake homeschooling.

How parents decide their children are gifted is also controversial since natural parental pride can easily rest on the hope of giftedness rather than discerning a reality of high ability. (This is rather ironic, since many parents of able children are very challenged by their children's upbringing and find the pressure of living with a very able individual demanding and less joyous than envious others might assume.) Even empirical work in the field does not yield definitive responses. Formal theory and research concerning the

exploration of giftedness stretches back to the 1890s, with the work of Francis Galton and adult achievement, through the contentious development of intelligence testing on both sides of the Atlantic. Myriad theorists throughout the twentieth century continued the discussions, embracing ever-widening definitions and arguing how to meet the needs of such children.[3]

In schools, ideas of relative ability are usually required. They compare children with peers and identify the high achievers as gifted or talented. As noted in the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) definition, the 'potential' for high ability can also be 'proof' of giftedness, although the measurement of this potential is unsurprisingly tricky. Because the definition is comparative, a child may be defined as gifted in one context, but not another. A clearer indication could come from stand-alone measures such as measuring intelligence quotients (IQ). In the field of gifted education, IQ scores are generally combined with other personality characteristics before definitions of high ability are confirmed.[4] With so many competing ways of describing ability, it is unsurprising that parents can become confused.

The accuracy and reliability of parents' decisions is something for another article since the focus here is on homeschooling for the able child. So, for the purposes of the discussion, whether a child is 'truly able' or whether the parents have a strong conviction that the child is gifted needs to be put to one side. Similarly, more important than the origins of high ability or how best to categorize or label people who have unusual abilities is the challenge of providing an education that is fit for pupils' needs.[5]

HOMESCHOOLING AND THE VERY ABLE

The description of homeschoolers as either 'ideologues' or 'pedagogues' (Van Galen and Pitman, 1991) has helped to distinguish between those who are unhappy with the content and those who are unhappy with the method in mainstream schooling. Van Galen suggests that ideologues are typically conservative, often fundamental Christians holding powerful beliefs about the role of the family in education (1991: 67). The pedagogues, conversely, are characterized as suspicious of modern educational practices and the concept of structured schooling as a way of perpetuating negative aspects of society leading to depersonalization and bureaucracy. They feel that individual learning needs are ignored and that teaching is insufficient for quality learning (Van Galen and Pitman, 1991: 72).

Stevens (2003) expands on Van Galen's analysis, by contextualizing it within the North American traditions of liberal alternative schools and Christian school movements, both born in the 1960s and 1970s. Stevens further explores the difference between the ideologues and pedagogues,

calling the former *believers* and the latter *inclusives*. He notes that believers have created 'a system that is built around leaders and discourages dissent' (2003: 115) whilst inclusives are more focused on democracy and consensus, rejecting the authority and control of the 'believers' (p. 146).

However, neither of these fully captures the issue of children being home-schooled to facilitate the best use of their abilities. The dichotomy does not allow for a different motivation. Generally the 'pedagogue' or 'inclusive' model is more closely linked, since the individual learning needs are the dominant concern, but this depiction is not wholly accurate. The liberal values that tend to underpin the actions of the pedagogues are not the focus of the families of the highly able. For many families with gifted children, forays into homeschooling are usually more pragmatic.

Stevens and Van Galen allow pedagogues a notion of homeschooling with a sense of child-centred free schooling in which the child should lead their own learning, even where parents might differ. This echoes the model lived by A.S. Neill at Summerhill, from 1923 until the 1970s, with children's freedom and personal expression as central aims.

> The function of the child is to live his own life – not the life his anxious parents think he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows what is best. (Neill, cited in Vaughan, 2006: 12)

This vision is supported by many of the organizations that support home-schooling parents, such as the Campaign for Home Education (2009). With echoes of Holt and Illich from the 1960s and 1970s, suggestions are made for how schools are harming children. They note, for example:

> Home educating families put the wellbeing of our children first. But perhaps necessarily some of us have a different definition of 'wellbeing' from the mainstream? (Campaign for Home Education, 2009)

Their websites echo the central idea in the following oft-used quotation in favour of deschooling:

> Children do not need to be made to learn to be better, told what to do or shown how. If they are given access to enough of the world, they will see clearly enough what things are truly important to themselves and to others, and they will make for themselves a better path into that world than anyone else could make for them. (Holt, 1964: 157)

Some organizations supporting homeschoolers are rather more agnostic and tread a softer path. Consider 'Education Otherwise', which was established in 1977, now has over 4000 members and recognizes that parents' motivations for homeschooling can be varied. Its website states:

> EO has never promoted any 'one right way'; our aim has always been to help parents choose the most appropriate form of education for each individual child, the decision

> being founded on informed choice and full consideration for the wishes and feelings of the child. (http://www.education-otherwise.org/history.htm)

But none of these approaches captures the views of many 'gifted families'. The laissez-faire, progressive approach is not necessarily central to the aims of parents of gifted children and, whilst I am not suggesting that the parents of highly able children are not interested in supporting their children and listening to their needs, they are often not animated by a child-centred ideal.

Exactly what drives families with able children to homeschool is examined below, but first some of the difficulties of researching the area need explication.

RESEARCHING HOMESCHOOLING; RESEARCHING GIFTEDNESS

Some well-catalogued discussions about the dearth of empirical research into homeschooling are summarized here:

> Studies of home schooling and socialisation have the customary faults of research in a very young field: no guiding theory, inadequate experimental design, poorly defined research questions, untried and weak measures, unorthodox treatment and presentation of data, and conclusions based on subjective judgements. (Medlin, 2000: 118)

The samples are also self-selected, largely self-reported and lack controls (Medlin, 2000). A few reasonably solid empirical surveys have been published, such as Chatham-Carpenter (1994), Rudner (1999) and Shyer (cited in Medlin, 2000: 118). These have been variously examined and evaluated (Welner and Welner, 1999), and findings seem to conclude that successes of homeschooling are reasonable in terms of academic achievement, peer socialization and the development of personal and family relationships (Collom, 2005). For example, Blok observes the following, whilst simultaneously sounding a note of caution about the quality of evidence in research studies (2004: 48–90):

> Scientifically speaking, there is nothing to support the view that home schooling is an academically inferior educational option . . . learning is possible – if not more effective – at home. (Blok, 2004: 50)

So it is difficult to study homeschooling. Gifted education also faces specific research challenges, even when the education in question is conducted in a more controlled and easily observable context, such as a school. One reason so little empirical research exists on homeschooling the highly able child is the difficulty in defining the group. In the school setting, in most districts and in most countries children need to be assigned a label in order to be allowed to participate in funded activities for highly able participants. In the home setting, such labels are irrelevant. As such, the target group is even more

contentious to identify (no labels at all), than in the school setting (contested labels).

The definitions, identification processes and labels of giftedness are problematic in themselves, and even less systematic evidence exists for non-formal settings than for schools. Most centralized education services still rely on the advice of psychologists who tend to undertake batteries of tests, with intelligence quotients from Stanford-Binet or WISC-R at their heart. Homeschooling parents have little need to run IQ tests on their children, nor do they need to assign a label relative to other children, and so no unambiguous empirical evidence can be presented. For example, Shaine (from the Hollingworth Center for Highly Gifted Children, New Hampshire, USA, and cited in Michel (no date)), remarks that homeschooling parents are reluctant to test their children and have little need for educational labels such as 'gifted'.

As with the research into homeschooling, we lack cross-cultural and cross-social comparisons so cannot demonstrate universality and generalizability. The nature and desirability of different outcomes of practice with the able also lack thorough investigation, and the broader questions concerning high-level thinking and learning have not been much scrutinized (Freeman, 1998).

Despite these gaps in research, many writers on gifted education have documented how mainstream schooling is continuing to fail very able pupils. This work (usually case studies and surveys) throws up the same issues time and again, suggesting they are worth reviewing.

HOW MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS ARE FAILING ABLE PUPILS

Ideally for able pupils, schooling would be more flexible and more challenging. Repeated cries can be heard: gifted children simply do not fit in to the mainstream; teachers (even the well-meaning ones) are unable to help, mostly for reasons beyond their control, but sometimes for more hostile, sometimes baffling reasons. From the literature and my own research, I would summarize the key reasons for adopting homeschooling due to the failure of mainstream schooling as: lack of challenge; socialization concerns; testing and assessment; curriculum; mismatch of values and beliefs; children's dyssynchronous development.

Many of these concerns relate to the inflexible structures of the school, which seem to be inevitable when large numbers of children are educated together on a tight budget.

Lack of challenge – Gifted children are frequently bored in class, and comments from both teachers and children highlight how difficult it is to

cope with more able pupils in the normal classroom setting. Examples of teachers failing to inspire or help able pupils often include some kind of empathy or sympathy from the pupils themselves who appreciate that their needs are just difficult to cater for in a busy classroom, but this does not alter the fact that they are not being intellectually stretched. Children report being told to 'Just go and sit in the reading corner and just think for a while until the others catch up.' They have also been asked to become tutors for classmates: '. . . which gets really boring – I wouldn't mind so much if I got paid!' Pinning down exactly what comprises challenge for each pupil is not straightforward, but closer attention, such as received in homeschooling, will be far more likely to identify personally challenging work for children. (I have argued elsewhere (Winstanley, 2004) for equality of challenge for the more able pupil as this is fundamental to the purpose of education.) Lack of challenge is also cited as a reason for truanting among the able (Freeman, 2001: 143–4).

Socialization concerns – Frequently cited as a negative aspect of homeschooling, socialization is ironically one of the common reasons for withdrawing children from school. Literature in the field of gifted education consistently shows that intellectually engaging peers are vital for healthy development (Freeman, 2001: 136) and that, because of their abilities, highly able pupils cannot always find these people in their school environment, with negative consequences such as dumbing-down to fit in better (Gross, 2004: 170). On weekend workshops, children visibly relax when they discover they can be honest about their interests and abilities. Witness this meeting of minds with two seven-year-olds in a poor area of Liverpool, England at the start of a music workshop:

Child 1: Are you here for the Early Music thing?
Child 2: Yeah, I really like the crumhorn. Do you like early music?
Child 1: I prefer Baroque, but early stuff is ok. Have you ever seen a serpent? I think sacbutts are better as the sound is mellower.
Child 2: It's deeper, yeah, but I still prefer woodwind to brass. I never met anyone, you know, like my age, who knows about crumhorns.
Child 1: Yeah, me neither. What's your name again?

Friendships built on mutual interest are not always easy in school settings when pupils' interests cannot be matched with peers. A whole genre of films is built around the geeky outsider failing to connect with peers. As part of homeschooling, specifically engineered social networks (actual and virtual) can help avoid scenarios of the able child as lonely outsider.

Testing and assessment – Gifted homeschoolers often sharply depart from the liberal pedagogues described by Van Galen and Pitman (1991) in this area. Some parents and children are very assessment driven, and taking exams *earlier*

than the average age is often the driving force for the highly able and their families, who emphasize academic excellence.

> I took my maths GCSE when I was 10 which was quite fun. We had to do it at the college because the school wouldn't let me. My dad did it with me even though he already did it but I still got a better grade than him anyway.

I have only anecdotal evidence for this, but it is possible that these parents (who sometimes have little education themselves) believe that 'exams are good as they prove ability'. This is a different profile from the homeschoolers who value children's liberty from testing and assessments and who would prefer to jolt the status quo rather than buy into it through putting their children through early examinations. The refusal of schools to allow children early exam entrance and the failure to provide the examination syllabus can be motivating factors for withdrawing children from formal education (January 2009, personal communication: conversation with staff from National Association of Gifted Children).

Curriculum – If a child shows exceptional ability in music, or dance, it is possible to provide an education that focuses predominantly on that ability. Such schools are more socially acceptable than withdrawing a child from mainstream schooling for exceptional abilities in say, history, mathematics or classics. If the child's interests and propensities lead them to want to study the same subject for extended periods of time, this can be accommodated better in the home setting, although specialist equipment and tuition may be more complex to come by as the child's knowledge and skills increase.

Many schools will not provide the subject areas that children and parents want to study at all. Learning multiple languages is usually not an option for younger children, nor is spending several hours every day simply playing chess. Online resources make this a viable alternative for homeschoolers.

Mismatch of values and beliefs – In this case the 'beliefs' in question are the parents' belief in their child's ability, not always shared by the teachers and school management.

> Her teacher really didn't believe that she could understand Dickens and I do know that some of the ideas are hard, but she just laps it all up and I don't see why I should stop her reading it just because it's not on the syllabus for her for another four years.

Sometimes psychological tests to 'prove ability' are questioned as these are often conducted privately, and teachers can be suspicious. The tests do not always serve as sufficient proof of ability for the school, and parents feel frustrated at every turn (Gross, 2004: 139–75).

When parents opt for the extreme of homeschooling, it can be due to a conflict with the school about what matters most. As mentioned, parents

can value a more achievement-focused education than that on offer, or an emphasis on different curricular areas.

Another aspect of conflicting values concerns the reward systems used in schools. It is not always that self-esteem is not catered for (as often noted by homeschooling advocates) but that the wrong aspects of development are emphasized (Boyer, 2002). Rather than worrying about a lack of nurturing and positive affirmation, pupils can find the strategies for rewarding attendance and effort rather empty:

> We used to have these Year 3 and 4 assemblies on Fridays to *celebrate difference*. We never really celebrated actually doing your work and getting good marks. You got points and Golden Time for being well-behaved. I had to keep quiet about getting my level 4s [regional schools' spelling competition] in case anyone else felt bad they couldn't get that level, which they couldn't, of course.

Children's dyssynchronous development – Highly able pupils develop differently by definition. High ability can be manifested as a higher level of attainment all-round, or propensities to do well in all subjects, but it is more often the case that advanced capabilities are discernible in only a few curriculum areas or even in just one. This is an uneven developmental pattern, which can be complex to manage. In such cases, schools generally try to accelerate the pupils in the subjects in which they show promise or accomplishment. It can be very complex to reorganize the school structures to allow for such arrangements, however. Schools are mostly organized by age group, which can emphasize difference for the able child.

Being excellent at mathematics might be dealt with through allowing children to attend maths classes with older children, if the timetable will allow. A more extreme example of uneven development would be hyperlexia, the ability to decode and read complex text without commensurate depth of understanding of what is being read. Children with hyperlexia lack the emotional maturity to cope with what they can mechanically read yet only partially understand. Their development is out of synch, and teachers need to be careful how they are accelerated, for development of their reading without causing undue upset.

Highly able children's unusual development patterns are even more marked where learning difficulties, mobility concerns, sensory impairments and/or emotional problems are also present. In the field of gifted education, these are known as dual or multiple exceptionalities (DME) and are yet further issues that are notoriously awkward for empirical research owing to the problems with defining the abilities and with measuring development, which is often jerky rather than smooth. DME can be characterized by high ability combined with a syndrome or condition such as Attention Deficit/

Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia or Asperger Syndrome. All of these conditions are difficult to manage in ordinary circumstances but, when they are combined with unusually high abilities, schools are particularly ill-equipped to support children's all-round development.

Examples of this can found among the training and equipment for teachers who support children with reading deficits, which are designed for a few typical models of learning problems. Materials for pupils with reading problems are by necessity rather simple in construction and theme. If the mechanics of reading cannot be mastered through regular instruction, it is logically assumed that children need a basic approach combining phonics with sight vocabulary. Some highly able children with dyslexia have specific visual problems, however. Rather than lacking the ability to respond to standard teaching methods, a specific block to learning exists, and the reading difficulty could potentially be eradicated in a straightforward, yet simple fashion, such as the use of a coloured plastic filter on the page to prevent the text from 'moving around'. Teachers working with children with special educational needs in standard school settings can lack training in a range of methods for working with able children, and are not usually qualified psychologists. They are generally unable to administer the diagnostic tests required to decide on optimum solutions.

Homeschooling is no more likely to provide the child with a qualified psychologist, but regular, targeted instruction will quickly expose a method that is unlikely to succeed and will allow for more one-to-one interaction (Kritzer, 2009). Parents determined to access available support and different pedagogies are no less likely to come across a solution for their offspring than teachers who have less regular and intimate contact with the pupils, despite their training and experience.

> The difficulty with highly gifted children in school may be summarized in three words: They don't fit . . . The child's intellectual needs might be years ahead of same-age peers, although the gulf may be larger in some subject areas than in others. (Tolan, 2002: 29)

'WE MIGHT AS WELL HOMESCHOOL, WE'RE PRACTICALLY DOING IT ALREADY'

Parents of gifted children seem to fall into homeschooling rather than making the deliberate choice at the start of their child's education. Reports of many families' pedagogic choice for homeschooling emphasize liberals choosing the option from the outset since these early basic reading, writing and social skills follow on logically from pre-school child rearing which has been undertaken by parents.

A difference exists between those who deliberately choose to homeschool children in the early years and those who feel forced to take their children out of formal schooling at a later stage. Deciding that a school environment is inappropriate for children in general is not the same as a creeping realization that school seems to be negatively affecting the development of a child. For parents of more able children, this is often the route into homeschooling and, whilst it fits into the 'pedagogue/inclusivist' model, it is not entirely like other parents ultimately making the same choice.

For parents of more able children, a programme of homeschooling activities is a regular feature of family life beyond the classroom as a matter of course. Although not a defining characteristic of high ability, minimum sleep and maximum activity are required by many able children. In order to satiate their desire for learning and to feed their curiosity, parents need a rolling programme of stimulating learning.

Over twenty years of teaching at specialist workshops, I have sometimes stayed in the homes of families organizing or participating in the activities for highly able children and have witnessed first-hand the need for such extensive activities, with healthy children reading, learning and playing into the small hours. These activities are jointly planned by the family and meet the needs of the children but are kept balanced by parents. When the work far exceeds the level of what is offered in school, it reduces the value of school into a kind of hiatus, interfering with progress and interests, as this teenager observes:

> It was like school was getting in the way of thinking – it was where I hung around waiting to get home to actually learn something.

Homeschooling for any children, including the highly able will clearly vary enormously, but flashpoints for dissatisfaction with schooling seem to exist and, logically, withdrawal from school will match these critical points (Gross, 2004). It is at these times that parents have to step up the home support for their children, filling the growing gaps and dealing with frustration and sometimes unhappiness of their charges. It is a significant step to move from running programmes of activities to full-time homeschooling, but it is not a massive leap for the active parent who has already spent years providing home learning to supplement schooling.

Flashpoints in schooling seem to occur around transition periods, such as starting school and shifting from primary to secondary provision. Able children are often forced to repeat much of their prior learning or required to intellectually tread water whilst their peers reach their level (Freeman, 2001; Gross, 2004). Already, a common response to the needs of more able children is to run pull-out programmes where children are withdrawn from standard classroom activities to undertake those more appropriate to their

abilities (Bailey et al., 2008). Rather than trying to reorganize the ordinary day to accommodate these arrangements, families can opt for homeschooling; 'the ultimate pullout program' (Smutny, 1989: 106–8).

For some, homeschooling is a temporary alternative to formal schooling to bridge particularly difficult gaps, or allow for sustained periods of focus on a particular area, rather than a full-time, permanent replacement.

> I was home schooled from Year 4 to Year 7 as I was way ahead of the others, and I wanted to really concentrate on the chess for a while. Since Year 8 I have been back at school because they have labs and stuff.

Different models are also encountered such as 'small schools' and cooperatives where most of the education is undertaken in the home, but regular visits and trips are organized through networks. This allows for learning in different contexts, skill-sharing and socialization (much like Illich's original vision of 1971). Here, a seven-year-old weighs up some pros and cons of the approach:

> Well, I miss playtime with friends. I do get to see friends, but it's more organised, like on Wednesday and Thursday when we do the Small School stuff with the others. In school there was playtime quite often and even in lessons you could be more of a group with friends all through the day.

Children and parents can see both the benefits and drawbacks of their homeschooling experiences and are aware that the choice is not a panacea. Learning can be appropriately flexible, individual and challenging, and if carefully constructed will meet the needs of a high standard of education, also allowing children to mix with other children outside the home (Jamieson, cited in Bates and Lewis, 2009: 122).

> For many highly gifted children home schooling is a nearly ideal solution to the problem of fit. Instead of laboriously altering ready-made programs, parents can tailor an education precisely to the child's needs. Clubs, sports, scouting, and other activities supply social interaction with other children while parents serve as teachers or facilitators or engage tutors or mentors in various subject areas. (Tolan, 2002: 30)

These children (fifteen and ten respectively) ponder the plusses and minuses of their homeschooling:

> I know what you think – I must be a weirdo, no friends and all that. Well, it's not like that for me; I have enough people to banter with, online mainly, but that doesn't bother me. It's more about the convenience of having everything close together. If I need the library or whatever I have to get the bus, you know what I mean. At school it was all laid on and it saved time.

> I miss the PE lessons. In the gym they had these really great bars which we were allowed to climb up in the winter when we had games in the hall. The park is quite good, but it's not as fun for us as it is for little kids.

OTHER ISSUES

I'd like to raise, but not answer, a few additional empirical issues. For example, if more able children were homeschooled, what would be the effect on mainstream schooling of having less gifted pupils in standard classrooms? A version of this question has been debated for years, in terms of selective versus comprehensive education systems and concerns about streaming and setting within schools. Policies have generally been able to manipulate the mix of different children who have all been within the system, albeit in different parts, and educated in different ways. An increase in homeschooling of the highly able would change the dynamic more significantly, however, removing a particular kind of pupil from that mix.

Concerns about access to funds are also relevant. Stories about parents who are able to access additional funds for their children's education if authorities admit liability for substandard or inappropriate education occasionally hit the press.[6] Some lobbyists have suggested that parents who home educate should be entitled to additional state benefits or to a reduction in taxes (see Education Otherwise for more discussion on this). Free access to public museums, galleries and science centres is also sometimes contentious as homeschooled children do not automatically get the free entry to workshops supplied for education and community groups.

The current financial climate may also affect gifted children in receipt of bursaries in the independent school sector. Like the Assisted Places Scheme (1980 to 1997) which afforded pupils from low-income backgrounds a place at a fee-paying school, open access schemes can help gifted children find an education that better suits their needs. These strategies are under threat as charities reconsider their funding priorities, and this could result in an increase in homeschooling for pupils who have already tried and rejected the maintained sector.[7]

CONCLUSION

Often a last resort for frustrated families, homeschooling may be the only way to ensure children's educational needs are met. Parents of highly able children are presented with advice about how to approach schools and teachers to explain pupils' complex needs. However, if no useful solution can be provided, the downsides of loss of earnings, potentially stifling relationships and other concerns are trumped by the opportunity to encourage children to learn and to flourish.

The families of able pupils do not seem to be pursuing homeschooling as some kind of statement. They are not supporting the movement as a way of

expressing an 'abandonment of a belief in the efficacy of common schooling' as warned by Van Galen and Pitman (1991) and Apple (2007). They are instead, making a pragmatic response to the situation they are in where schools cannot cope with their unusual children.

> It's not that we wanted to un-school him or anything. We both really liked school. We were tired of constantly trying to prove that he needed to read harder books and do harder work. It's just easier to get on with it ourselves.

NOTES

1. The informal quotations in this article come from pupils and parents interviewed informally in the period January 2008 to February 2009. The discussions were conducted during workshops with children and young people from seven to seventeen years of age, from a variety of urban and suburban backgrounds, all within couple of hours' travel to central London. Participants spanned different socioeconomic circumstances and a total of 189 people attended the workshops over the 13-month period. Around 15 per cent had some experience of homeschooling, and so the quotations are drawn from a few of these 27 children and their parents.

2. These Institutional Quality Standards, together with the Classroom Quality Standards, hail from the Quality and Curriculum Authority (2008) and outline expectations of teacher and whole-school practice. They are not enforceable.

3. The key players are Galton and Binet (1890s to 1920s) and Spearman (early twentieth century) followed by Terman (largely looking at genetic notions of giftedness, 1910s to 1950s) and Hollingworth (interested in environmental concerns, 1920s to 1940s, including posthumous publications).

4. Sternberg's (2000) triarchic model includes analytical, experiential and practical intelligence; Renzulli's (1977) 'three ring' notion demands task commitment, creativity and high measurable IQ; Gagne's (1991) 'differentiated model' separates aptitudes from mastery and emphasizes the 'developmental process'.

5. For further information about high ability from the perspective of parents, see National Association of Gifted Children websites: (US) http://www.nagc.org and (UK) http://www.nagcbritain.org.uk.

6. An example from the UK is of families being awarded more than £10,000 for home education after the council conceded that it had failed to provide children with reasonable state funded education ('Parents given home teaching money', BBC, Wednesday 8 April, 2009).

7. One example of such a strategy is the Open Access Scheme, run jointly by the Sutton Trust, a charitable institution, and the Girls' Day School Trust. The scheme will not be renewed once it has run its course.

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