

A Short History of Home Education

A community memory of home education in the UK

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General

Home education has always been common among the country's elite. The Royal Family have all in the past been educated at home, including the current Queen, though more recently royalty have attended various public schools.

Prior to the mid nineteenth century there were few schools open to average families. Some churches and the occasional enlightened employer provided primary education, but provision was patchy at best. However, since the advent of compulsory education in the UK in the 1870s and secondary education in the twentieth century, home education became increasingly rare among the population at large.

US Influence

In the twentieth century home education as a mass movement began in the USA. In 1925 Tennessee State won a prosecution against a teacher called Scope for teaching Darwinism (at that time illegal in Tennessee.) In the next few years a number of other states introduced similar legislation leading to the teaching of Creationism (the theory that the world was literally created in seven days as the Judea-Christian book of Genesis suggests) in many parts of the USA.

During the 1960s Creationism was ruled to be a 'belief of faith' by the Federal Supreme Court and, since the US constitution requires the separation of state and religion, laws requiring Creationism to be taught in state schools were ruled unconstitutional. This led to discontent with the school system amongst conservative Christians. At the same time 1960s 'counter culture' saw the rise of sociologists, psychologists and educational theorists like Rogers, Illich and Holt, who highlighted the failings of state education and began advocating first democratic education in alternative schools and, later, more personalised education such as home education.

Despite these pressures on the school system from disparate groups, home education remained a fringe activity until the late 1970s and 1980s, when it was picked up by the neoconservative and evangelical right in the US, who also objected to the ban on religious observance and lack of religious content in state schools. It was for this reason that majority of home educators at this time were religiously motivated and largely followed structured curriculum approaches, very similar to school methods of the day.



During the late 1980s and 1990s secular families began to notice the growth in home education among the religious right and a growing number of families, whose children were having problems with state education, began to withdraw their children. Many of these families rediscovered the writings of Illich and Holt from the 1960s and began to use these to provide philosophical frameworks for their educational provision. The existence of the internet probably played an important part in making information about home education more freely available and in community building, helping the phenomena spread to those who wanted a more personalised education than schools could provide for their children.

Today the US Census office believes that around 3% of all children in the USA are home educated. 60% of these are home educated for non-religious reasons and this proportion continues to grow. In some states, e.g. Florida and California, the numbers of home educators are sufficient to threaten the continued existence of the state education system. In other states, e.g. Alaska, the state actively encourages home education with grants. (This is seen as a solution to problems related to educating children in remote communities and is cost effective compared to constructing public buildings close to or in the Arctic Circle.)

Interestingly there are now a small number of school boards in southern states trying to reintroduce the teaching of Creationism into schools alongside evolutionary theory. This is again being challenged in the courts and it remains to be seen what effect this may have on home education. Since feelings on the subject run so high it seems likely that whichever way the court rules there will be a wave of disaffected parents turning to home education to ensure that they retain the right to pass on their beliefs, either religious or secular, to their children.

The beginning of a mass movement

In the UK home education as a mass movement began in the late 1970s and began to rise in numbers from the mid 1980s. By this time the growth of home education in the USA began to exert an influence. Academics like Meighan developed their own models of home education; often combining rediscovered British texts, some dating back to the 1890s (like those of Charlotte Mason) with later writers like Bertrand Russell and A.S. Neill (who had created alternative educational schools in the UK) alongside the works of US writers like Illich and Holt. This gave a theoretical framework to the new UK movement.

By 1978 home education had grown sufficiently for the formation of a support organisation. Education Otherwise was created in Swindon by a small group of parents. While numbers grew rapidly from the 1980s, in absolute terms they still represented a small proportion of all children. All this changed during the 1990s. The increasing accessibility of the internet allowed home educators to communicate more freely and media interest in the phenomenon grew. Channel 4's Witness production, for example, brought home education to the attention of the population at large (immediately after the broadcast of that particular production all the home education support organisations reported a significant rise in the volume of enquiries that did not drop away).

By the millennium home education could be seen a significant national movement with a range of support structures, which had grown in importance and confidence, Internet support such as mailing lists and websites developed and proliferated and a number of parents



published books advocating or supporting home education. Today many estimate that between 1 and 1.5% of all children of 'compulsory education' age are home educated in the UK, which compares with less than 0.5% children educated in fee paying education.

European developments

In the rest of Europe there are growing movements of home educators, each with their own character, often networking together to promote home education across Europe as a whole. In some countries like Germany home educators have gone to jail or faced threats of the removal of their children to establish their right to home educate. In other countries, like the Netherlands, home educators are working through the courts, media and political system to inform the public and change the law. In Norway and Sweden home education continues to be illegal, while in other countries it is legal, but rare; for instance there was only one home educating family in Finland until recently.

In France where home education is legal home educators have been dealt set backs with changes in the law that require families to register with the local mayor. It appears that mayors do not have to explain their decisions. In southern Europe home education remains rare but by no means unheard of. It is legal in Italy, Spain and Portugal though outside cities it is rare and difficult. In Eastern Europe home education is generally either illegal or difficult, but interest still continues to rise.

Whatever the difficulties, there are growing numbers of home educators throughout continental Europe. These families are beginning to organise and campaign to establish the right to educate their children at home. 'Learning Unlimited', a network of home educators in Europe, supports this campaign.

Home education today

Today, home education is become a significant feature of education provision in the UK. Few people today can claim not to have heard of this option, something that was not true even a few years ago. Frequent, positive mentions in the media have contributed positively to its popularisation and many more parents consider it as a valid option when considering their decisions about how and where to educate their children.

The growth in numbers means that there is increasing local support available in most of the country and all LAs have experience of home educators, though many Educational Welfare Officers still have little personal experience and practically no training.

Despite this picture, government agencies often persist in confusing home education with social isolation, exclusion or children being at risk. Truancy patrols continue to represent an unacceptable level of harassment in some parts of the country and dialogue with LAs and the DfES remains patchy, although some progress has been made in specific localities and OFSTED has acknowledged the importance of input of local home educators in LA policy.

Future developments



The creation of two national databases of children, one for all children and another for those children who have had contact with welfare agencies, is another policy issue currently causing home education parents concern, with some realistic fear that home education will be seen as an automatic risk factor when dealing with children. However, there is also an expectation that the home education community contains a wealth of expertise and experience to support its continued existence and growth.