

## 10. Purposive conversation and effective learning

We live in an age of continuous change and the constant revision of knowledge. So, I proposed in an earlier column, that we parents need to become constant researchers. This means noting any useful ideas in new books. Here are three that challenge, inform and develop new interpretations about education. On the face of it, they are about 'full-time' home-based education, but they all ask fundamental questions about education in general. And since we are all 'part-time' home-based educators in the gaps around school hours, they apply to us all.

The most recent one is **Educating Children at Home** by Alan Thomas (Cassell, 1998), a psychologist interested in individualised learning methods. Since schools have a poor track record in individualisation, he turned to home educating families in both Australia and the UK where individualised learning is 'business as usual'. But what impressed Thomas was the amount that occurred largely through social conversation with an adult. He noted a remarkable amount of spontaneous incidental talk. Personally, I prefer to call this 'purposive conversation' to distinguish it from ordinary social exchanges. Thomas reminds us of the research that shows that high achieving 'genius' children have a background of both individualised attention and purposive conversational learning, which are found to be major factors in their accelerated intellectual development.

The research of Alan Thomas is based on a hundred home educating families. He shows that at home, lessons are concentrated and intensive. Little time is spent on the distractions that absorb so much time in classrooms. With increased efficiency lessons are short and often confined to the mornings only, and this leaves plenty of time for extra purposive conversation. Not all families use formal lessons and they then give over even more time to purposive conversation.

Next, learning at home becomes an interactive process rather than a series of tasks to be tackled. Therefore, any mistakes that are made, rather than creating barriers to learning, become steps on the route to enlightenment. In this interaction, concepts are acquired, skills improved and new knowledge is gained during the course of concrete, everyday activities or through topics that have captured the learners' interests. Parents and children can be unaware of the efficiency and power of their learning regime. Parents remarked that it was only when they looked back over a period of time, or kept a careful record, that they could see just how much high-quality learning had taken place.

Thomas reports that, *"the initial worries which home educators have concerning social development gradually fade as they see their children growing up, confident and relaxed in adult company and able to relate to children of all ages."* Parents come to see that it is actually the school that is cut off from the real world.

The research concludes that home educators give us a view of education which, in many respects, is markedly different from what is on offer in school. Their approach has the potential to bring about the most fundamental change in education since the advent of universal schooling in the 19th-century. But we will need a new kind of institution in place of schools to bring this about.

The second book is **Strengths of Their Own: home schoolers across America** by Brian D. Ray (N.H.E.R.I publications, 1997). In a mere 139 pages packed with information and

analysis, Dr. Brian Ray, director of the USA National Home Education Research Institute, presents the results of his recent study of home-based education. He took a USA nation-wide sample of 1657 families and their 5402 children, and all 50 states were represented. The results support his earlier findings that indicate that home-based education is the best option available, and that schooling, whether private or state, is now the second best choice. Michael Farris, of the Home School Legal Defence Association, is quoted as saying that:

*"... parents who take personal responsibility for the education and socialisation of their children reap a harvest of exceptional children who are well prepared to lead this country into the next century."*

The growth of home-based education in the USA seems unstoppable. At first, it was estimated that the numbers would flatten out at one percent of the school-age population. Now that it has forced its way past five percent in various States, some think it may peak at 10%. But good news is infectious, and others now predict that 50% of all children within a generation, will be learning in home-based education, for a significant portion, probably 50 %, of their school-age time.

The research identifies the positive outcomes of home-based education on topics as varied as students academic achievement, social and psychological development, and the performance of the home-educated when they become adults. Adults who were home-educated are, typically, in employment rather than unemployed, independent-minded and entrepreneurial in outlook, and think positively about their previous home education experiences.

The study explodes the 'lack of socialisation' myth. Children were engaged in a wide variety of social activities spending, on average, 10 hours a week in such things as music classes, play activities outside the home, sporting activities, church organised groups, Scouts and Guides.

In an earlier study, 58 percent of families have computers in the home. In Ray's latest study, this has risen to 86 percent. The children use computers for educational purposes, but the only subject to which there was a significant positive difference, was reading, since those using computers scored higher in reading tests.

A personalised, self-designed curriculum was used for 71 per cent of the students rather than a set, purchased package. The programme selected a variety of elements from the information-rich society in which we now live, including some pre-packaged items. Ray, like Thomas, explores the methods of learning and also identifies purposive conversation, as a key reason for the success of home-based education.

Ray suggests that home-based education may eliminate, or at least reduce, the potential negative effects of certain background factors. He shows that the success of the home educated is unrelated to low family incomes, low parental educational achievement, parents not having formal training as teachers, race or ethnicity of the student, gender of the student, not having a computer in the home, starting formal education late in life, or being in a large family. He explodes another myth - that home-based education is for the well-off. The average family earnings for home-educating families was below the national average.

Finally, there is the intriguing indication that 'the family that learns together, stays together'; home-educating families show signs of being more stable, with their members more fulfilled and happy as a result.

The third book is **The Art of Education: reclaiming your family, community and self**, by Linda Dobson, (Home Education Press, 1995). For Linda Dobson, school erases key abilities such as curiosity, imagination, creativity, inner peace, humour, artistry, self-motivation, and intuition. In return, school offers "*indoctrination in accepted ideas*".

School develops bad habits, Dobson observes, and a notable one is learning to rely on experts to solve problems for us. For Dobson, home-based education is **family-centred education** where the members grow into self-reliance and healthy scepticism of experts and professionals. It uses the principles of natural education which require only a guide to provide encouragement, support, some direction, and a learner ready to discover and create goals and values that are personally meaningful. In appendix A to the book, the list of famous adults who were home-schooled includes seven presidents of the United States and various scientists, inventors, authors, explorers and business people.

In proposing that the government way is an inadequate one, and that family-centred education is superior, Dobson sets about exploding various myths about home-based education. She does this by describing a day in the life of a home educator. All the wealth of learning she lists, are "*accomplished in the warm, loving, safe environment of home! No bells, no tests, no peer pressure, no competition! Individual attention, individual progress, individual choice! The art of education - pure, stressless, naturally occurring ...*"

We learn how the Dobson family began home-based education. The oldest child's brief stint in public school kindergarten had already revealed a number of worrying features. There was the stress of formal book learning begun too soon. Then there was the behaviour-altering effects of peer pressure. Next, there was the personality-altering effects of school discipline. Finally, there was the dispiriting effects of boredom and irrelevance.

Home-based education worked for the children, but also expanded the life of Linda Dobson: "*As the children acquired basic skills - reading, writing, arithmetic - their interests expanded. So did mine. Their sense of wonder blossomed. So did mine. Their abilities multiplied. So did mine. Their confidence increased. So did mine.*" Some friends were impressed but protested that they could not cope with being with their children all day long. They failed to see that the irritating behaviour of their children is a consequence of schooling. Other friends worried about the cost, but the sum of money needed is flexible, especially now that we live in an information-rich society with plenty of free resources available.

Another gain was a strengthened family life. "*Our institutions still give lip-service to the family as the first and most important building block of society. But by destroying the natural cycle of love and respect, inherent in family life through their demands that children 'socialise' in artificially inflated institutional settings, they are contributing to the destruction of society itself.*" Human beings, she declares, are capable of wise decision-making when they are not paralysed by authoritarian hierarchies or impersonal structures that diffuse individual responsibility.

The radical thought is developed that education could be improved with one simple reform - eliminate schools. Instead, establish learning centres dedicated to meeting the unique needs of

all the learners who took up the invitation to attend. Several examples of these learning centres are described: Paris, Lexington Virginia, Providence Rhode Island, and Kansas City, and the Centre for Personalised Education Trust is supporting the founding of such centres in UK.

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[There is a fourth book, also by Linda Dobson, which is of particular interest to anyone actually starting or considering full-time home-based education. It is **The Home Schooling Book of Answers: the 88 most important questions answered by home schooling's most respected voices** (1998). All the books listed above are obtainable from HERO Books, 58 Portland Road, Hove, East Sussex BN3 5DL Telephone 01273 775560]

*Roland Meighan - January 1999*