

17. Grandparent power?

The phone rang. It was a grandparent. The voice said that the family had been talking about the possibility of home-based education. Children, parents and grandparents alike, were unhappy about the domination-riddled and learner-hostile schooling that they were experiencing. The parents were both out at work. What did I think about the grandparents undertaking to supervise home-based education? I replied that I thought that this was an idea well worth exploring.

There have been a trickle of inquiries from grandparents asking similar questions over the last twelve months. Since this has not happened in the previous 23 years that I have been researching home-based education, I am beginning to wonder if this could be the 'start of something big', as the song title puts it. Is it the beginnings of grandparent power?

A recent report from Japan about classroom breakdown, contained the following paragraph. "Classroom breakdown is a serious concern not just for the educators but for the business leaders who exercise influence in Japanese society. It was reported that in seminars targeted at business people ordinarily interested in little beyond matters of the economy, lectures on 'classroom collapse' drew noticeably larger crowds than usual. Their anxiety about what is happening to their young grandchildren, rather than their grown-up children, is notable."

In the USA, public opinion on home-based education has shifted. The shift amongst grandparents has been a particular feature. In the book by Brian Ray, *Strengths of Their Own*, he reports that currently, 67 percent of grandparents supported their families' practice of home-based education. About 22 percent were neutral, and only 11 percent were opposed. There has been a change here that follows the general trend, which is that in 1985, 73 percent of a Gallup poll survey of the general population in USA said home-based education was a bad thing. In 1997 this had fallen to just over 50 percent. The reason suggested was that favourable stories about home-based education were in contrast with continuous nightmare stories about mass compulsory schooling. Interest has increased to the point that the Internet bookseller, Amazon USA, now lists over 200 books on the subject of home-based education, and they are selling steadily.

Demography also suggests the possibility of grandparent power. In UK, in 1901, life expectancy for women was 45 and for men it was 49. In 2001 life expectancy for women is expected to be 80 and 75 for men. By 2020, it is expected that 40 percent of the population will be over 50. All this amounts to a rapidly growing population of grandparents, and indeed, of great grandparents.

I recently saw a notice about a grandparents pack which contained suggestions of ways in which grandparents can use books and stories with their grandchildren. It had been put together by the public library service, spotting the potential of grandparents. It had information about choosing books, helping children learn to write, do craft, do cookery, make puppets, and telling stories. It was useful to grandparents whether their grandchildren were attending school or being home educated.

A recent public opinion poll (MORI), commissioned in UK by the Campaign for Learning, found that 90% of adults, including plenty of grandparents, were favourably inclined towards further learning for themselves. In the right environment, they were willing to undertake further learning. The bad news is that 75% said they had been unhappy and alienated in the

school environment, and that, therefore, they preferred to learn at home, in the local library, at their workplace - anywhere other than a school-type setting. Not surprisingly, more and more adults are uneasy at putting children through the same kind of schooling experience, now extended to 16,000 hours - as much as double what some grandparents will have endured.

A recent newspaper article was entitled 'rise of the silver surfer'. It showed how in the USA the over 55 age group has been the fastest-growing sector of American Internet users. The report showed how there was a similar trend to be found in the UK. It is also the case that computers are helping to break down the ageism of our social structure. The idea that the young cannot teach the old anything, is shown to be nonsense when you observe five-year-olds teaching their grandparents how to surf the Internet.

Similarly, the idea that you cannot 'teach an old dog new tricks' is exploded by the 'silver surfers' phenomena. Many of the ageist assumptions about learning have been exploded by the experience of the Open University. The idea that you cannot learn in old age is shown to be dubious when people are graduating in their 70s and 80s.

As further evidence, John Holt wrote a book entitled *Never Too Late*, describing how he learnt to play the cello in his 50s. He reached performance level with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, thus refuting the idea that if you failed to learn a string instrument early, it became impossible later.

A USA grandparent, a former head teacher, recently wrote to me from California about the experience of his grandson: "... we should start a campaign to 'scrap schools'. There is no hope to change them. I am working now with one small elementary where my grandson attends. It is a lousy school as you and I view learning - but sadly, it is better than most in the area. In trying to work with 20 teachers to find four who might start a non-graded, individualised school-within-a-school, I have yet to find one I would hire - let alone put in a new environment. They have no vision of what it could be - and are so overwhelmed by their daily personal lives, and the oppressive mandates of the district, that they have no chance to 'renew'."

None of the grandparents who have telephoned - often resulting in very long phone calls - have blamed individual teachers. It is the learning system of coercive, compulsory schooling that appalls them. "My grand-daughter never did anything mean, underhand or spiteful until she went to school and began to learn some bad habits," said one. "I have watched my lively, cheerful, bright grandchildren gradually losing their sparkle," said another. They recognise a crucial fact about learning systems, that how you learn is as important, if not more important, than what you learn. Thus if you learn literacy in an oppressive regime, you become literate with the attitudes of oppression included. If you learn to read and write in a regime of co-operation and power-sharing, (such as Summerhill School), you become literate with democratic habits of mind. If you become literate in a flexible, learner-friendly home-based education regime, you become flexible, creative, resourceful and ... literate.

Many of the observations of the grandparents reflect the findings of a study I have mentioned before, by Ann Sherman, and reported in her book *Rules, Routines and Regimentation*. She informally interviewed children in five different Midlands schools after they had had one year of schooling. Children felt that they were on the receiving end of a crushing process that they endured with considerable reluctance. Children were aware of a 'hijacking' process,

where their interests, feelings and concerns were disregarded, but they felt powerless to do anything about it, and saw no alternative but to surrender to it. Ironically, this process is described as giving young people their 'entitlement', when, in truth, it can be seen as taking some of their humanity away.

Some grandparents are starting to find their voices and speak out against what they see as 'the deadening of the spirit of their grandchildren', as one put it. They want a celebration of the joy of learning, sometimes recognising that the primary school classrooms their own children experienced had visitors from all over because they were, at least, pointing in a more humane direction. If this protest continues to increase, long live grandparent power!

By Roland Meighan, first published in Natural Parent, July/Aug 2000