

3. Parents as researchers

Twenty educationalists including home-schoolers, headteachers, industrialists and researchers, met at the University of Nottingham last Autumn. They spent two days exchanging ideas on the theme of education in the year 2020. One thing everybody agreed on straight away was that the climate of uncertainty, due to continuous change, would not go away. 'Continuous adaptation' was here to stay.

In this situation, parents will have to become active members of the learning society themselves, and become constant researchers. By this, I do not mean writing research papers, but asking questions and sifting evidence and any offered answers. Tolstoy suggested that the only real objective of education was to **create the habit of continually asking questions**. (Governments are not always disposed to agree, finding passive minds more acceptable.)

There is another reason why parents need to become researchers. A few years ago, a student on a Master Degree in Education course became wearied by the constant procession of research studies presented week after week. He asked me to tell him what, in my opinion, all the studies told us in the end. I asked for time to think about it. Next week I gave a verdict. "*What they tell us,*" I declared, "*is that we do not know how to do it. We do not know how to educate children in a complex and changing world. If we knew, we would not have to research it any more. All the research is doing is trying to find useful clues.*"

This statement still holds. But we do have more and better clues than before. But it means that parents do not have to believe over-confident teachers and educationalists, just as patients do not have to believe over-confident nurses and doctors. We can sift the evidence for ourselves, especially with the aid of magazines like *What Doctors Don't Tell You* and *Natural Parent!*

Asking questions may lead to unexpected conclusions and actions. Those reluctant educational heretics, the home-schoolers, decided that they could make decisions based on their experience and the available evidence, that were at odds with 'professional' opinion. They may have even come to the same conclusion as George Bernard Shaw who proposed that "*all professions are conspiracies against the laity*", well, some of the time anyway, if not most of the time in some cases.

One danger of parents thinking for themselves is that they may be regarded as eccentric. We can take comfort from the words of Bertrand Russell when he said that we should not fear to be eccentric in thought, because **every idea that is now taken for granted, was once said to be eccentric**. It is not the case, however, that being unorthodox guarantees that you are right. There are many possibilities for error, and plenty of unorthodox ideas are dubious, or prove to be just plain wrong.

Becoming a researcher is a permanent state because in the situation of continuous change, solutions are likely to be temporary expedients. The task might often be to decide the lesser of evils rather than achieve any certain answer. Or the task may be to replace familiar skills with new ones. The computer field illustrates this well. When I wrote a book with my Amstrad 8256, I thought learning all the new skills was well worthwhile. Before long I needed to learn again to work with a PC and Word for Windows. Now I am learning yet again to take on the new skills needed for my voice-driven computer.

One shortcut for parents to become well briefed in educational ideas is to be found in the use of quotations. For example, when Mark Twain said that he "*never allowed schooling to interfere with his education*", he drew attention to a number of propositions. One is that schooling and education are not the same thing, and can often be entirely opposed. Another is that your own private investigations, conducted in your own time and in your own way, can be valid education. Indeed, one of the reasons why schooling and education can be in opposition is that the questions and concerns of the learner can gradually become replaced by the official questions and concerns imposed by others and, even more oppressive, the officially approved answers.

For a second example, take the quotation from George Bernard Shaw when he says: "*What we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge, not knowledge in pursuit of the child.*" This quotation alerts us to a fundamental objection to a national curriculum or any adult imposed curriculum. It turns learning into a 'child-hunt' where knowledge hounds the child rather than a 'knowledge-hunt' where learners are encouraged, supported and advised in their seeking out of knowledge. Because I found quotations to be such a powerful aid to thinking, I compiled a book of quotations on education. People tell me it is useful to stimulate discussion, question assumptions, and expose myths and superstitions.

Another shortcut is the use of analogies. When people say that we should learn and memorise things which may be useful to us in the future, we can try to think of other examples when things are done now in the hope that they may be useful later. The activity of squirrels comes to mind. They collect nuts, bury them and then try to locate them later. Are we being asked to believe that children should collect adult-designated nuts of information, then bury them in their memory, in the hope that they may need to dig them out later? Is this the most effective way to spend time?

For another analogy, Edward Fiske, former New York Times Education Editor, concluded that getting more learning out of our present schooling system was "*like trying to get the Pony Express to beat the telegraph by breeding faster ponies.*" An analogy like this alerts us to the ancient nature of the mass schooling and its growing obsolescence due to slowness to adapt. Perhaps tinkering with the system is like getting the stagecoach to go faster by strapping roller skates on the hooves of the horses, when what is needed is a new kind of transport altogether, such as a railroad.

It helps to locate useful sources of information, but I think it was Winston Churchill who said it is better to read wisely than widely. You could read every newspaper every day, but I doubt if it would be worth the effort, and it is better to choose one that does not insult your intelligence. *Natural Parent* is one useful source, and *ACE Bulletin* from the Advisory Centre for Education, set up to advise parents, is another. I think *Education Now News and Review* is also good, but I must declare a vested interest here.

Finally, the title of 'parents as researchers' is, perhaps, misleading. It might well read 'families as researchers' since adults and children alike will need this mentality to cope with our ever-changing world and our own slow-to-adapt schooling system. In addition, purposive conversation among family members and others, about these and any other matters, is one of the most effective methods of learning we know.

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