

Freedom in Education

February 2005

Welcome to the February edition of the Freedom in Education Newsletter. I would like to begin by thanking all those people who have joined the contact list, since the last issue. It has only been online a month, but there are already entries from people in England, Wales, Ireland, the Channel Isles, France, Australia and America. It would be wonderful to see it grow further and start to become of real use to people. If you would like to take a look at it, or add your name to it, [click here](#):

Contact List

There are two articles this month, the main one **Do Teachers Know Something We Don't?** and also a short article about **home educating in France**, as this seems to be a subject of great interest to many of our readers. My family and I have lived in France for nearly eleven years, now, and are keen to help and encourage other people who are thinking of taking the step.

If you would like to send a comment, link, favourite quote, or news about an upcoming event to be included in next month's newsletter, please [contact](#) me.

Wishing you all the best for February,

Wendy

Quote of the Month:

"Knowledge cannot be carried away in a vessel, you must receive it into your soul and then go your way, either greatly harmed or greatly benefited.

"Therefore we should deliberate and take counsel before we entrust ourselves to a teacher."

Socrates

Do Teachers Know Something We Don't?

At one time the process of finding a suitable teacher for one's children was fairly straightforward: if someone was 'educated', i.e. if they could read and write, then it was assumed that they could teach other people to do the same.

Over the past fifty years, however, attitudes have changed and many people now believe that a person has to be a 'qualified' teacher before they are able to teach any academic subject.

What do People Really Learn at School?

If this really was the case, it would set school work in a category all of its own. In every other area of human activity the ability to pass on what one has learnt is an intrinsic part of having a skill or understanding of a subject: for example, when people learnt a trade through serving an apprenticeship it was assumed that they were then competent to take on and train apprentices themselves; similarly most people learnt most of the skills that they would require in daily life from older members of their families, who had themselves learnt from older members of their family, when they were young.

In such situations, the process of learning, and the process of teaching are very closely related. For example, within a family, older children teach younger children things that they themselves have only just learnt, and it is often by explaining things to other people that the person doing the 'teaching' begins to understand the subject themselves. When viewed in this light, a situation, such

as school, in which children are expected to learn but have no opportunity to teach, is highly artificial.

The majority of children now start their schooling when they are only four or five years old, and remain in a school-type institution until they are eighteen years old – this is fourteen years of full-time ‘education’, which is almost twice as long as *anyone* spent at school until a century ago, and yet it is accepted that when someone leaves school, they have no useful skills, and they are still not ‘qualified’ to teach anything that they have learnt to others.

This lack of knowledge is particularly clear to school leavers themselves, who though they may be able to list the subjects that they studied at school – Algebra, Trigonometry, French, Science, English, Chemistry, History, etc. – would, in most cases, be horrified at the idea of teaching them to someone else. In fact, most school leavers have no idea of why they studied what they studied. If they have acquired expertise in any area at all, it is usually in knowing how to pass exams without understanding the subject, how to cram for an exam and to then forget everything that they have learnt, and how to while away the time in the classroom without expiring from boredom.

Because people have come to accept that this is just the way that school is, they have failed to notice that there is absolutely nothing else that people do in their lives which is such a waste of time.

The Teaching Profession

Ironically, once people leave school, they resume the process of learning and teaching almost straight away – if they have a job they learn how it should be done from their colleagues, and they are then quite able to pass on the required skills to any new people – but schoolwork always retains the mystique of being the one thing that they could not learn and certainly could not teach to others.

This raises the question of how a few people managed to make the transformation from being school pupils to school teachers – and whether such people really do have an understanding of the material on the school curriculum which has escaped the rest of us.

In fact, one of the most puzzling things about school teachers is how they can imagine that they could have become such experts in the subjects that they teach in the short space of time between when they leave school and start teaching. When children are at school hardly any of them get every question right in tests and examinations, and, furthermore, the children who do best hardly ever go on to become school teachers themselves. Even so, it is quite common for there to be only a space of three or four years between someone leaving school – as an averagely successful student – and them returning to the classroom as a fully qualified teacher. People who do this have not given themselves time to digest and evaluate the material which they are meant to be teaching, for themselves, with the result that they are just trying to repeat things that they have themselves been taught, without questioning and without understanding. People who do this are not giving themselves a chance to bring anything new to their work and the best that they will be able to do is mimic their own teachers. In practice, they are unlikely to be quite as competent as the teachers who taught them, as they will have

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forgotten or misunderstood some of the material that they learnt when they were young, and thus the standards that schools are able to maintain gradually slips over a period of time.

Most people can remember their teachers telling them things that were palpably incorrect, and, of course, there must be daily instances of teachers making things up which children, in their innocence, believe to be true. In an attempt to remedy this problem schools have instituted more controls over what teachers say and do: the curriculum is pre-determined, there are regular school inspections, children are given regular tests, and standardised teaching materials are provided. In turn, this has resulted in teachers becoming terrified that if they show even the slightest initiative or do anything even the least bit different from everyone else, then they might be detected in making an error, and their careers will be blighted.

This creates a very poor atmosphere for learning, and negates the whole purpose of having a teacher.

Do We Know Something Teachers Don't?

When one appreciates the difficulties faced by school teachers it is worth re-evaluating the skills possessed by ordinary parents. In the first place, most parents start with the advantage of not being qualified teachers and they do not believe that they already know everything that there is to be known about a subject. When they sit down to do some work with their child, it therefore has to be more in the spirit of discovery than of instruction, and as a result is much more in keeping with the true spirit of education.

Schools create the false impression that knowledge consists of a fixed set of established facts, and that in order to become educated, one simply has to learn all these facts and then be able to repeat them.

In fact, blindly repeating things that one has not been able to verify for oneself could be used as a definition of ignorance. The aim of education should be the opposite of this: to help people to think for themselves, to study for themselves, and to come to an understanding of established ideas without necessarily accepting them unquestioningly. Ordinary parents, even though they may remember very little of what they did at school should not underestimate their ability to achieve this themselves.

False Assumptions

The assumption that it is more natural for children to be taught by qualified teachers than by their parents is clearly erroneous, and if instead of the current situation, in which it is almost considered abnormal not to send one's children to school, parents stopped to consider whether or not a particular school, or a particular teacher, was really capable of teaching their children something that they could not learn at home, the results might be surprising.

In the first place, it would call into question the validity of primary school education. Almost all of today's parents have themselves attended primary school, and should therefore be able to read, write, do arithmetic, etc.; if their primary schooling was successful, then, logically, they should now be competent to teach all these skills to their own children and if their primary schooling was unsuccessful, then they would have no cause to commit their own children to a situation which their own experience has proved to be a waste of time.

The situation with regard to secondary education is a little different because secondary school teachers do have knowledge, in their specialist subjects, beyond the scope of most parents.

However, this raises the question of when it is best for a child to start specialising in one particular subject, and how a child is supposed to cope with having a range of specialist teachers, each of whom does not understand the work being taught by the others.

In many ways, specialist knowledge is the price that we have had to pay for having a school-based education system. In the past, people who set out to gain an academic education studied everything that there was to know: foreign languages, Latin and Greek, philosophy, mathematics, science, music, literature, art, etc. In modern schools, even high-flying students spend most their time looking out of the window, or lost in a day dream, and thus only ever learn a fraction of what they are capable of learning, with the result that they have to drop most subjects so that they can learn at least one subject in depth.

Thus, instead of helping people to achieve a balanced range of knowledge, our education system produces people who know a lot about one thing and almost nothing about everything else. This is dangerous for society – we have scientists who know nothing about art, artists who know nothing about science, people skilled in one branch of science but ignorant of how their work will affect other areas, etc. – and is limiting for the individual, both in the sense that people are missing out on learning things that they may find interesting, and also in that their ability to survive in the world becomes limited.

When looking for work, people with a school and university-based education are dependent on finding a job which matches their very limited range of knowledge. Someone who has taken the trouble to give themselves a broader based education, even if it is not to a university standard in each subject, is in a much better position to forge their own way in the world.

A young person working on their own, particularly if they have the support of at least one of their parents, is more likely to achieve this broad-based education, than someone who is at school, being taught by a group of people, each one of whom may be a specialist in their own subject, but none of whom have achieved a proper broad-based education for themselves.

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None of this is to deny the value of having a good teacher. The world is full of people who possess all sorts of skills and who have mastered all sorts of subjects. Most of these people are not professional teachers – in most cases they are working in the field in which they have expertise – but this does not mean that they don't have a desire to pass on their knowledge to another generation.

When one does find a good teacher – whether it be in music, art, technology, crafts, languages, or whatever – it is often not necessary to enrol on a course with them, or even to pay them any money; often just a few conversations are enough to provide the required inspiration.

This provides a clue to the natural order of things: parents are the people best qualified both to care for and to educate their own children: when children have a desire to learn things which are beyond the scope of their parents' knowledge, it is still the parents who are best able to help them, simply by taking an interest.

In this endeavour parents may sometimes be assisted by people who really do have genuine skills and knowledge of a subject – but one of the biggest mistakes a parent can make is to relinquish

control early on in their children's education simply because they think that their job could be done better by a 'qualified' teacher.

Gareth Lewis

Home Education in France

We have been living in Brittany, France for the past eleven years, and have home educated our children for almost all that time without encountering any difficulties at all.

Notwithstanding this fact, I frequently read that home education is either not allowed in France, or if it is allowed, it is governed by so many rules and regulations that children may as well go to school.

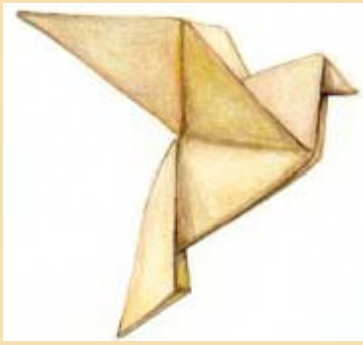
This apparent divergence between theory and reality has led me to reflect on the nature of the question "Are you allowed to home educate in such and such a place?". The question assumes that there may be people who are prepared to stop parents doing the thing that parents, by definition, have to do – i.e. look after their own children.

Also new to the Jamboree

website:

Paper Dove

A classic origami design, which your children are sure to have fun with!



Over the years, I have met families living in countries which appear to very definitely forbid children being educated anywhere but in school (Germany and some Scandinavian countries for example), and yet they are happily teaching their children at home with only minimal interference from government officials. Similarly, up until the 1980s, home education was not officially allowed in many states in the USA, but when parents started to teach their own children themselves, state employees did not have the heart to persecute them on grounds which on close inspection turned out to be that they were simply trying to be caring parents.

Experience has shown that parents who keep calm, who do not ask the State for assistance, who convey a sense that they know what they are doing, and who are united, are able to home educate in countries and places where the legal framework would appear to be

completely against them.

France is not such a country. It is true that the past two hundred years have seen the growth of centralised bureaucracy and the development of a rigid education system – both of which tend against freedom in education – but running alongside them is an ingrained belief that the sole purpose of government is to serve the people. Every government employee has to constantly balance the requirement to enforce a myriad of regulations, and the requirement to ensure that each person is happy with the service that they receive.

In these circumstances, home education remains a perfectly feasible option in France, and one is just as likely to meet with offers of assistance (even financial assistance) from local officials as with obstruction.

Obviously, people whose livelihood depends upon the school system *do* feel threatened by families who opt out of school and they may wish that they could force children to go to school, but this is a problem common to every country, and learning to deal with it seems to be an inherent part of being a parent in the modern world.

My personal experience has been that France is a wonderful country in which to raise one's children, and therefore I cannot help but recommend it to others who are considering moving here.

GL



www.jamboree.freedom-in-education.co.uk

Also new to the Jamboree website is the story of the Laconic Lacedaemonians (or Spartans), and the unabridged version of St Francis of Assisi's hymn to creation, in Italian as well as English.

Letters

A Father's Role

What an excellent and needful article on the role of the father in a family and of course the child's education! How necessary in today's society! I've often thought that fathers are gone too long in the best hours of the day! Children hardly know their own dad!

As a homeschooling mother of eight, I'm glad my husband has shift work with Air Canada, where he is home mostly during the day when we are busy with the kids. Also, whenever I have a baby, he can take parental leave. He considers that time spent together homeschooling, working and playing a valuable investment in our children's lives.

Presently, he is off work for 10 months, and is a tremendous support while we work our way through a huge family tragedy that happened just two months ago. I lost my sister and her seven beautiful children in a house fire. Her husband Marc is facing life alone now . . . very difficult at Christmas especially. He was a very involved father too - as he farmed and even had a child seat installed in his tractors so he could take his kids along. He has no regrets about how much time he spent with them all. He was 'home' everyday, and could get involved in all their lives. He said you never know when your loved ones will leave you, so spend that precious time with them now! Give your wife and kids a hug! he said on a TV interview. My brother made a website dedicated to their memory: www.monikaslife.com please check it out.

After I read your article about fathers, I thought of Marc, and had to write. Thank you for your insightful articles and the care you put into your web-site - we look forward to them every month. Thank you Wendy for being an excellent editor.

Sincerely, Julia Jansen, Canada

Legal Help

My name is Jane Harvey. I am a legal executive with the Emery Johnson Partnership, Solicitors, and I work in the Family Department dealing with private law applications. I have just recently concluded a specific issue order case which was about Home Education.

My client and her 7 year old daughter wished to continue to home educate but the child's father was against this wanting to enrol her in state school.

The child in question was clearly thriving under her mother's tuition and wished to stay at home. The result was that we won the Court battle much to my client and her daughter's delight.

The reason I am writing is that I wanted to know if there is any way I could notify others in the same position that we as a firm of solicitors can help to resolve Home Education disputes either by way of negotiation, mediation or litigation, whichever proves necessary and appropriate.

Jane Harvey

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Chance to Share Experiences

Hi Wendy

just found the site - it looks great. So great to see you doing something on men - its so needed. I wrote and published a book a couple of years ago called The Male Agenda which is working its way out through word of mouth - the whole idea was to shed some light on the male dilemma! Interesting thing is its being championed by women!

Winnie and I are putting together contact details, research etc on college students/adults who have been through homeschooling. We'd love to put a documentary together if possible. I'm sharing this with you because we'd love to hear stories from anyone who has experience to share about how home education has impacted upon their development and growth.

If you have any thoughts as to how we could get this info out there, or anyone who might be willing to share stories, we'd love to know.
Many thanks and keep up the great work!

Have fun

Barry

If you are interested in sharing your home education experiences for a documentary, contact Barry at: **barry@artofchange.co.uk**

Toolkit for Self Learning

I've recently completed a text called the Toolkit for Self-Learning that can be downloaded via the web for just £2 GBP. It is a unique, concise yet thorough guide to the core skills that every learner will need from the age of 13 onwards if they are to do well.

More information, along with the introductory chapter, is available at <http://www.t4sl.co.uk/>

Regards,

Peter P. Jones

Chess Champion

Hi thought you may like to see this about our son Peter for the newsletter. It appeared in the WorldNet Daily News in December'.

'An 8-year-old homeschooled British boy who reportedly is the best under-10 chess player in the UK is at risk of being forced back to government school – but his parents are determined to keep educating him at home.

On July 7, the local school district sent the Williamses a notice demanding that Peter's parents provide information about his education or he would be required to return to public school.

Peter's father filed a complaint with a government ombudsman, and says he will not provide any education information to the council.

"We have refused to allow any member of the council into our home or to meet with them, as their views are biased. We have to provide Peter with an education suitable to his age and ability, which we are doing; we are simply refusing to prove this to the local education authority. Incidentally, we cannot find any law that states that we must provide them with this information."

"The last thing he wants to do is to go back to a state school," Williams said. "He very much enjoys learning at home, studying all the subjects he is interested in."

We are now waiting for the report from the ombudsman.

Also, would anyone like to write or e-mail Peter (pen pals etc)? Our e-mail address is carol@williams4939.freemove.co.uk

Best wishes,

Carol & Peter Williams

*If you would like to send a comment, site-suggestion, favourite quote, or news about an upcoming event to be included in next month's newsletter, please **contact** me, Wendy.*

Please send contributions to: wendy@freedom-in-education.co.uk

Or you can write to Gareth Lewis at: gareth.lewis@freedom-in-education.co.uk

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