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A Broad and Balanced Curriculum?

by Stella Howden

The government in the UK think they have produced 'a broad and balanced curriculum' in the form of the National Curriculum that is used in state schools in England and Wales. But is the National Curriculum broad and balanced?

The DfES like to think so, and they would like the general public to think so too.

I taught in a variety of schools in England for over fifteen years. I don't feel that the National Curriculum is broad and balanced. I also feel that the goal of producing a broad and balanced curriculum for school pupils is an almost impossible task.

How can a curriculum that is aimed at all children be an effective curriculum?

At any given time it is likely that the curriculum on offer is not meeting the needs of the majority of the pupils in the class group.

If your child attends a school this is a problem for your child and you. The way to avoid this problem is to home educate your child.

Some Local Education Authority inspectors feel that home educated children should be following the National Curriculum. Some new home educators tend to feel that they should follow the NC. A smaller number of long term home educators also follow the NC.

Generally though, home educators soon decide that they can offer a better education for their children by following their children's interests.

Surely by following the interests of the child the education will be truly broad and balanced.

Let's examine the concept of 'broad':

In school education it seems to mean 'thinly spread'. The areas to be covered are designated in a way that makes it difficult for the pupil to expand an interest during the school day. The timetable is restrictive. If the pupil wants to pursue his interests further, he must do so out of school hours. At times the learner feels that he is wasting his day on fruitless tasks, only to have to pursue his true interests either before school begins or at evenings and weekends.

In a home education setting the 'breadth' can be tailored to the individual and is a 'custom fit' for each learner.

The learner does not need to waste time on areas that are of little or no interest to him. There is every opportunity to spend time studying to a level that the learner feels meets his needs.

In addition to being able to follow areas traditionally offered in schools, the home educated child can begin an interest in more unusual themes. She is free to think about areas until she feels that she has done enough for her individual satisfaction. There is no restriction on the areas that a child may pursue. A child may begin an interest and the timescale of the interest may be short lived. At other times the child may find a deeper interest and continue for a longer and deeper level of exploration. Alternatively, the child may discontinue an interest in a given area, and go back to it at a later time.

Some home educated children appear, to the casual observer, to have narrow areas of interest, but on further reflection it soon becomes apparent that these chosen interests are in fact richer than those experienced in a school setting. Home educated children are often real experts in their areas of interest.

The National Curriculum also professes to be 'balanced'.

Presumably this indicates that there is a good spread of subjects which aim to give a good 'all round' education, but in reality this is little more than a euphemism for 'spreading thinly'.

The idea of 'balanced' sounds like a good one, but is it?

Many adults admit that they remember very little from their school education. They say that they learned things for exams and then forgot them. Why is this?

It seems that for something to be assimilated and remembered it has to be of real interest to the learner in the first place. Real balance can be achieved by a home educated child, because she is able to select those areas that are of intrinsic interest.

Whilst home educated children have ownership of their education and are able to shape their education so that it fulfils their needs, schooled children often seem disenchanted with their education because they don't own it.

If a particular area that happens to be part of the National Curriculum does not appeal to the home educated child then that area can be omitted from the child's learning, either until the child develops an interest in that area, or even permanently if the child finds that it suits them.

For instance, a number of home educated children opt out of reading until a later chronological age than schooled children. If a child is given the chance to develop an interest in reading when it suits her then she is less likely to develop the dislike of reading that a high number of schooled children seem to have.

In a school setting, a child who does not read will be disadvantaged due to the limited methods of conveying information in schools. A home educated child, however, is not reliant on reading or any other curriculum area in order to access the rest of her education.

Home educated children may choose to study something that is not normally considered a curriculum area. A child may become an expert at a pursuit that is not normally thought of as a child's interest.

Gardening is an area that some home educated children become adept at. This may appear to be a narrow area, but on closer observation is likely to include many traditional NC areas:

maths, science, geography, history, art, and physical education, to name a few.

The child has a true desire to learn so the learning that takes place is of value to the learner. The home educated child has a good model of learning that they then use to pursue further interests. The child then has a positive view of learning and feels a great enjoyment and satisfaction from her experiences.

A learner who has this pattern of assimilating knowledge will be able to use this method of approaching new things throughout life. Schooled children often feel lost when they leave school and go on to college, university or begin work, because they don't know how to use self-direction.

Home educated children approach new situations in an open and interested manner. They are able to learn how to go about finding things out for themselves and are also good at relating to people of all ages.

In reality the true broad and balanced education is that which the self-directed learner is able to use in their home education.