

Doing It for Themselves

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In its pure form, when home educators talk about autonomous education, they mean an approach to learning where the student/child controls all aspects of the learning environment. However, how this is applied in practice depends upon the confidence of the parent in following an autonomous approach. How home educators apply the idea of autonomous education varies enormously. Some will rigorously follow the child's interests in all areas while others do so only in some, insisting that the child studies what the parents believe are key or 'core' subjects, usually; maths, literacy and possibly science or languages. However, research done some 7 years ago in the UK suggested that the idea of autonomous education informed the efforts of the vast majority of home educators, particularly those who did not do so for reasons of faith.

Autonomous education in the UK has its origins in the work of John Holt in the 1960s when he wrote about unschooling. Unschooling, a term coined by John Holt in his book *Unschooling*, is an educational approach that rejected formal school methods. Instead Holt argued that educators should follow the interests of the child. Holt originally attempted to adopt his principles within the school setting in which he worked, but found that his method was contra-intuitive to most other trained teachers. He eventually concluded that unschooling was only really feasible within the context of families. His ideas spread through talks, lectures, books and a seminal magazine that survived until the early 2000s called 'Growing Without Schooling'.

In the 1990s a British movement called Taking Children Seriously evolved. TCS advocated a child centred, non-coercive approach to parenting. By the early 2000s TCS was a highly influential concept among home educators and the ideas behind it were discussed at length almost everywhere they gathered. At its core is the idea that parenting should essentially be a consensual relationship where children and adults within families treat each other as autonomous individuals, each with the right and responsibility to make their own decisions. Parents however retain a duty to advise and inform their child and to support and resource the child's needs. While it was informed by Unschooling, it also had its roots in libertarian thinking and the educational philosophy of Carl Popper and Hume's concepts of free will.

Over time home educators began to think of themselves not as TCS parents but rather as Autonomous educators and Parents. AE became gradually more popular among the ever growing number of home educators in the UK. A home educating parent, Dr Jan Fortune – Wood wrote a series of books on this subject culminating in her work *'Winning parent Winning Child'* which continues to sell well.

During the early 2000s, Jan gave a series of influential talks to large numbers of home educators at national gatherings and by the late 2000's, most home educating parents who were involved in the wider home education community in the UK, who were not families home educating for reasons of faith, regarded themselves as educating and parenting in a style that at least contained elements of autonomous education and parenting. In practice it

would be fair to say that for the most part they applied the ideas flexibly, though there were a significant core group who were far more rigorous in their approach.

Autonomous education is often confused with unschooling and many UK home educating families consider the two terms as interchangeable, however, strictly speaking, autonomous education and unschooling have quite different points of focus. Unschoolers begin from the principle that schooling is inefficient and ineffective and possibly damaging to children's education, since it prescribes what a child must learn as well as the way this learning must take place. Unschoolers point out that while such methods may be necessary on the grounds of efficiency and cost, within the context of mass state education, more flexible and effective methods can be followed by home educators working at home with just a very few children. Radical Unschoolers follow their child's interests and the child decides day to day what and how they want to explore their world. This can take the child in unexpected wide ranging directions of thought and research. It's this unpredictable flexibility that is its strength.

While unschoolers adopt informal, flexible learning methods intended to match their child's specific needs and autonomous educators often share the views of Unschoolers about the inefficiencies of school, autonomous educators begin from a more fundamental point. They start from the premise that it should be *completely* up to the child to decide what process of learning they undertake. This could be *any* form of education at all, including school.

Autonomous education therefore, is not primarily about how learning takes place but about who decides and what options are open. In fact the theory itself says surprisingly little about the educational method though it is highly critical about anything which restrict choice.

While it is fairly rare for autonomously educated children to be found in school, it is far from unheard of. Indeed the children of some firm advocates of autonomous education have attended school for either short or long periods, usually to achieve some set goal. This sometimes puts autonomous educators at odds with unschoolers, leading to all kinds of confusions in discussions between and within the two groups. There are therefore difficulties in identifying common traits in terms of the day to day practicalities of education among families who autonomously educate their children.

You cannot reliably look at what a family is doing on any particular day and conclude that the parents are autonomous educators or not. To do this you would have to engage with the family to understand the motives that lie behind what they are doing. It is partly for this reason that UK home educators are encouraged by their advisors to produce short educational philosophies to hand to the authorities who insist on monitoring them.

Intrinsic motivation is a core concept in autonomous education. Most autonomous educators subscribe to the notion that a child who is 'force fed' information in formal, structured lessons, such as one finds in schools, about which he or she is disinterested, is far more likely to forget whatever is learned when the immediate need to retain it has passed, this usually being when the exams are over. Few children (or adults for that matter) retain information gathered for the purpose of passing an exam for very long after the exam is completed. Psychologists have even discovered that information that is actually useful to the person is less likely to be retained if that person is offered an additional reward for learning it.

Extrinsic rewards, like examination certificates or 'gifts' are counter productive to the learning process. The only reliable incentives for true learning are those derived from intrinsic motivation, that is, those motivations arising from a genuine desire or need to learn something to achieve a personally set objective.

That having been said however, some autonomously educated young people will, from time to time, sign up for structured courses to achieve personal objectives. For example a young person wanting to go to university may decide to take maths and english courses as a simple way to prove competence in required subjects to university admissions tutors. Others will undertake distance learning courses, sometimes all the way through to post graduate level as a means to an end. Autonomous educators then, are flexible and open in their approach, especially so when the child requires evidence to offer third parties when applying to gain access to higher level learning in their chosen subjects. Many autonomous children however, manage to avoid formal education all the way to degree entrance level, even in 'hard' sciences like physics studied at good universities. A number of young people have gained entry to university in the UK using portfolios of their experience in lieu of examination certificates.

However it would also be fair to say that the majority of autonomous home educators in the UK engage with their children in an unstructured way. On a day to day level, it would appear to some superficial observers that autonomous home educators who follow unstructured approaches do little or even no education. It is rare to find autonomously educating families sat around the kitchen table studying open text books. Indeed many such families will have no text books in the house as a matter of principle since educational text books are seen as having hidden coercive power as they are normally written in subject groups with curricula in mind which may restrict the child's imagination and thinking to areas within those curricula areas.

It's far more common to see families sat talking and discussing issues that weave their way around a wide range of apparently unconnected subjects and interests. A discussion might begin with a computer game, an historical scenario on the Mongolian invasion of Europe perhaps, it may move on to issues of medieval technology, political systems, comparative religion and philosophy before settling on epistemology. This can take place over an afternoon, a week, month or longer and may involve children ranging from as young as 7 or 8 taking part.

Such discussions can be a deeply satisfying experience for children and adults alike. Conversations of this sort can involve impromptu trips to the local library, sorties onto Google and phone calls or emails to friends who may have specialist knowledge. Any resource at all can be utilised in the quest for learning. Should family friends be present they are often left confused by the bewildering range and speed at which children, used to such conversation, soak up new ideas like sponges, only minutes later to come back with yet more thoughts on the same theme but from totally different perspectives, to an observer of such exchanges it can look like some kind of educational kung fu, free flowing, fast, agile and highly effective.

Researchers, such as Alan Thomas and Professor Roland Meighan, who have observed these exchanges have terms like Purposive Conversation to describe them. Purposive Conversation is nothing new, it's what most parents who are engaged with their child's education will do in the evening after school. But in the case of families which consciously, autonomously educate, these conversations take place not at the margin of family life but at its very core. Every moment and event in a family are opportunities for engagement and these moments can consume many days at a time as an idea is pursued to the end, only being abandoned when the child decides he or she has sated their interest. Occasionally an idea or interest arising from one of these apparently random discussions can become all consuming and a child may continue researching it through to adult life.

Those who say that autonomous education is simply a cop out, an easy option for parents who don't want the hassle of acquiring a 'real' education for their children, simply do not understand how it works. Speaking as a parent who has, more than once, been woken by a child at 3am who announces they have just "got" something they were trying to grasp six hours ago and wants to 'clarify a few points', meaning talk all night about it, I can say that it's most definitely not an easy cop out.

Autonomous education is not for the faint hearted. Not for the autonomously educating parent is the easy mantra that education is the responsibility of the school, that if things do not work out well, the fault must surely lie with their child's school. The autonomous home educator knows only too clearly that the only person to blame for failure is themselves. It is rare to find a complacent autonomous home educator.