

# The Myth of Experts

by Jan Fortune-Wood

In a recent radio debate an education professor from Germany opposed the idea of home education on the grounds that parents could not possibly have sufficient expertise to teach their own children. It's not a new argument and its one that persists that despite any amount of credible research showing that outcomes (however defined) are good for home educated children regardless of the educational background of their parents.

When we first began home educating, casual enquirers in cafes and supermarkets would ask us about the legality of home education. These days nearly anyone who asks has heard of home education and most say they think it's a great idea, often saying they would have done it themselves if they had felt confident enough to 'teach all those subjects'. Home educators know that real education isn't about being able to 'teach' everything and that a so-called lack of expertise doesn't need to impede us in helping our children to learn whatever they want, be it cookery or physics.

The myth of experts is one that is bolstered by conventional education. Compulsory education removes learning not only from the learner's control, but also from the parents' sphere of influence. Both parents and children are deskilled by a system that perpetuates the myth that expert teachers are vital to learning. The concept of skilled families is replaced by the notion of families who either conform (and so are consequently seen as 'good') or don't conform (and are consequently seen as 'bad' or dysfunctional). In turn, the notion of autonomous, rational children is replaced with the idea of dependent sub-humans, with little or no insight into their own learning needs and goals.

There is undoubtedly a role for expertise in modern life. We can't all know everything. Skill and knowledge specialisations and the interdependence that comes from them are a foundation for human progress and prosperity. This does not, however, justify the bogus 'professionalisation' of learning *per se*. Learning is an activity of life and introducing compulsion and extrinsic motivation into this activity not only impedes the intrinsic growth of knowledge, but it is unlikely to have the outcomes which educators intend since the 'products' are not passive, but complex autonomous human people.

It might well be the case that schooling is set up with the 'best interests' of children in mind, but the very act of defining these best interests for another human being, and then compounding this basic error by coercing children into schools, negates the intention, however laudable. It is a big jump from saying that experts serve a useful purpose and ought to be listened to with serious consideration to asserting that children cannot learn without teachers. The logic is simply not apparent and nor is this the experience of thousands of home-educated children and their parents.

Most parents, however unconfident they might feel, take it for granted that (barring insurmountable disabilities) their child will learn to walk, to talk, to perform a burgeoning number of complex functions and display a huge array of learning before the idea of schooling ever surfaces. Yet, extra-ordinarily, parents fear that these same children will stop learning and fall into ignorant savagery if they are not forced to go to school at increasingly young ages and there learn what the so-called experts dictate.

The idea that school and teachers are the essential pre-requisites of learning is as false as it is widespread. We all know that learning takes place on a much grander and more unpredictable scale than schools can ever cater to; yet societies persist with the cult of expert teachers. Why?

The reasons are legion, but a key issue is that schools, apart from any learning agenda that they ostensibly have, have become the bastions of free childcare; much to the relief and convenience of many parents. Each summer we have visitors (living in Snowdonia seems to have increased our popularity), most of whom have their children in school. The father of one visiting family told us in no uncertain terms that he simply did not want to spend time with his children; he could not envisage a life in which they featured for more than an hour a day and he could not conceive how it could be possible for families to survive financially or emotionally if there was any more than this minimal child-parent interaction. Perhaps such an attitude is not surprising in a society that routinely sees children as problems to be solved. Naturally, this bolsters the idea that school is a solution; children are not only occupied, out of sight, but are 'getting an education' and a free one at that.

Along with this convenience, comes a cost, which itself becomes another reason for continuing to believe the myth. Parents and children alike are deskilled and made dependent by the myth that learning requires teachers. Parents come to believe that they could not possibly compete with the learning opportunities available within schools, often without ever questioning whether these are the learning opportunities that are relevant to their children. Children themselves come to believe that without coercion they would be lazy, unmotivated and lapse into stupidity.

Home education explodes all of these myths. Parents and children are ideally placed to develop their own spheres of expertise and to access the expertise of the communities, whether geographical or virtual, in which they move.

Dispensing with schoolteachers does not mean dispensing with useful experts. Many home-educated children find creative ways to locate just the kind of expert help that their intrinsic motivations require. It might involve hiring a music tutor; it might involve posting a question on an academic board of an Internet newsgroup; it might entail phoning a local university professor or going to an archeological dig or a veterinary surgery or an artist's studio. The methods are as disparate as the human imagination allows. The common thread is that the learner is centre stage, accessing the information and resources required for his own pursuits with the aid of parents who will give all the help they can.

Home education is not anti-expertise. Rather it is anti-external-agenda in education; it is anti the myth of expertise which says that there is only one way to learn and that this one way is to be found only in artificial places called schools. At its best, home education uses expertise much more richly than schools can ever hope to, and often by the child's own lights and without forming the closed assumption that this is the only way to learn.

Throwing off conventional notions that only experts can teach children tends to give home education three characteristics. Firstly, it gives rise to learners who are more resourceful, creative and flexible. As society becomes increasingly event-driven and flexible, schools continue to produce a preponderance of people more suited to an outdated society based in factories and large offices and characterized by inflexible chains of command. Home educated children are much better placed to adapt and improvise, much less likely to be biddable and unquestioning.

Of course this characteristic is a double-edged sword. Creative, flexible people are well placed to go on being life long learners able to find solutions, but they pose a problem to any government or system that wants obedience and not thought, passive consumers and not active creators.

As home educators we may be rightly pleased that not buying into the myth of experts gives our children such freedom of thought, but it also brings us into conflict with a mainstream where

privacy and human rights are being continually eroded.

Secondly, home based education tends to give rise to learning which is more diverse than the learning allowed for within any curriculum. Across a spectrum of home-educated children, many individual children will tend to exhibit passions and knowledge that are more specialized, deeper, and perhaps more idiosyncratic than their school-going peers.

School curricula sell the myth of education that needs to be 'broad and balanced'. Behind this rhetoric is the fact that in trying to cater to everyone, schools have to opt for small amounts of shallow, disjointed knowledge, much of which will be irrelevant and forgotten by most of the learners at any one time. Home education is a much more efficient and targeted form of learning because it is intrinsically motivated.

If children seem to be following their passions to the exclusion of other areas, we can do well to remember that most of life's real 'experts' found ways of doing just the same, often in spite of the school system. Innovative thinkers are usually those who really care about the area they are thinking about, often to the exclusion of much else.

Thirdly, home education tends to be less predictable than school education. It is arguable that the predictability of school education is itself a charade, and that the concepts of 'value-added' and 'outcomes' applied to children are not ultimately effective even within the system they serve. After all, school fails at least as many children as it serves so the predictability is cold comfort. On the other hand, home educators are often not likely to be able to decide where their education is leading to. Home education demands a certain amount of serendipity, much vigilance for clues of what learning and resources might be helpful, and a great deal of trust and optimism. These are things that mainstream education is not prepared to risk.

My visiting friend was right on one point, home education certainly demands an input of resources, whether in time, money or raw commitment to our own children, and if we want our children to be conforming, homogenous products then it may not be the path to take. If, on the other hand, we value autonomy or true freedom in education or the family as the fundamental unit of learning, then we have an established, growing and flourishing alternative in the thousands of home educating families who are already re-defining what education means.

Home education is not merely a negative expedient in the face of a failing system, but a positive range of educational choices. The learning environment can be precisely tailored to individual learning styles and preferences. One child might prefer to work in a stimulating environment, full of sound and colour, while another chooses a calm, quiet environment. The friendly learning environment focuses on strengths, building self-confidence and self-esteem. Criticism comes only as something constructive and welcome. The child (together with his or her family) defines and creates the environment rather than the environment defining (and labelling) the child.

Families practicing home-based education are free to pursue event-driven lifestyles rather than clock-driven lifestyles, allowing maximum flexibility and access to an increasingly event-driven society. Government-controlled curriculum is replaced with the positive idea of learning dictated by the intrinsic motivation of the child and/or the educational philosophy of the family.

Home education helps children develop research skills as they increasingly learn to control and manage their own learning. This equips them to be real researchers and producers of knowledge, not just consumers of pre-defined educational packages.

Home education naturally promotes a sense of being in control and responsible, part of a wider vision of developing and supporting moral and humane family and societal institutions. Children

remain a full part of local communities with the ability to fully access community facilities, such as libraries, shops, museums, exhibitions, theatres, transport, art centres and so on.

Home educated children don't need any false notions of expertise; they can seek genuine experts as and when they need to, but they can also learn that ultimately, when it comes to their own lives, they are their own experts and their own best resource in the process of becoming life long learners.