

Testing, Testing 1, 2, 3.

The issue of 'testing' home educated children comes round perennially and remains acute for autonomously educated children, whose education is so easily misunderstood by a mainstream educational establishment bent on defining education as a tick box curriculum and children as products to whom value is added. In the United States one large home education support group will only accept as members those who affirm that they teach by systematic instruction (not by following autonomy and intrinsic motivation); only those who are effectively playing at 'school at home' are seen as defensible. In The Netherlands autonomous home educators are fighting for their rights to exist at all, in some cases using American studies of 'tested' home educators and their achievements to argue that home education is viable per se and should no longer have to prove itself by offering up children for testing. As one home educating Dutch father put it,

"These test results are now helping me and other Dutchmen in the courtroom, despite all the objections I have about testing a child against his own will or interest. It's a bit like using medical data derived in a concentration camp for your own research."

In the United Kingdom there is a constant tug of war between home educators and Local Education Authorities about what constitutes evidence of an efficient education according to age, ability, aptitude and any special needs (the legal criteria) and the mentality of testing is never far below the surface.

Autonomously educating parents are often caught in a seemingly impossible situation. They are required by law to educate their children and there may be times when they are called on to give evidence that education is taking place. Sadly, this is too often taken to mean that evidence is synonymous with producing children's work for scrutiny, supplying timetables, plans and diaries of completed work or even subjecting children to unwanted testing and questioning.

Evidence is not synonymous with any of these things. In the UK it only has to be some supporting information that on the balance of probabilities would lead a reasonable person to agree that an education is taking place. The lure to go further than that is highly detrimental to autonomous learning, but it often comes with enormous pressure, whether from authorities or from friends and neighbours who believe that evaluation is for the children's ubiquitous and iniquitous 'own good' even when it goes beyond what is legally required or morally or educationally justifiable for those of us who value our children's autonomy and personal integrity. So where does this leave the business of evidence and the thorny issue of testing?

Testing of children misses the point on several valid educational grounds. Firstly, it wrongly assumes that individual testing of home educated children validates or invalidates a whole theory and practice of education. It is patently obvious that when schooled children are tested a whole range of scores are achieved. Some children perform at the top of the standardised test range; others fail miserably and go through whole school careers of failure. The percentage of 'high achievers' within this standardised, curriculum controlled system has always been less than the percentage of students who learn that they are mediocre or apparently stupid. This status quo of disparate and often woeful results sometimes results in new educational fads or so called 'shake ups' of how public money is spent, but has not so far led to mass calls to scrap the schooling system all together or brought it into utter disrepute and no-one (except



perhaps a few radicals and home educators calling from the wilderness) suggests that the children who did not score well should never have been to school in the first place. In short, we don't expect every schooled child to perform well in order to show that schooling is valid and yet there is an all too prevalent assumption that every individual home educated child should be performing well (according to conventional and restrictive standards that may not even apply) if they are not to risk being told that home education is failing them and they would be better off in school.

This brings me to the second and related issue of where the burden of testing should lie. Children have a right to an education and parents have the duty to see that their children have access to education. In the UK the legal formula is that it the parent's duty to ensure that the children receive an education by attendance at school 'or otherwise'. What is relevant to providing evidence is not that any individual child can perform well in any mechanical and artificial standard attainment test but that the parents are committed to ensuring that children have every opportunity to pursue whatever it is they want to pursue. Testing this educational commitment and intent does not require intrusive home visits, requests for children's work or learning diaries, which make artificial distinctions between subjects or what does and does not have educational content. Rather it simply requires that autonomously educating parents find a way of showing on the balance of probabilities that they are serious about the education of their children and, as such, have nothing to fear from the demands of providing an education.

The burden of any evidence which they submit to education authorities may rest on a full statement of their educational philosophy, setting out their serious intent to ensure that their children receive efficient full-time suitable education. Such a report can fully demonstrate that since life and learning are inherently of a piece in autonomous education then all of waking time (and perhaps even sleeping time) is spent on education. Such a report would be in keeping with respect for the child's autonomy; having no concept of attempting to cause a child to know any particular essentials, but rather of ensuring that education is 'efficient'. A child learning something to suit his or her own intrinsic and individual purposes is surely the most efficient form of education possible; it inherently achieves that which it sets out to achieve. Alternatively, parents might ask others to write accounts of the education they have witnessed their children receiving. The point is that testing whether education is taking place is not the same as testing a child.

Thirdly, and much more fundamentally, autonomous educators can contend the whole concept that education is a product that must be consumed. Is this the case? There are sound theories of learning that do not say so; from Illich to Popper there are epistemologies that reject the notion of all human learning as a discrete, deliverable package as thoroughly as they reject seeing the learner as another product to whom the educational product can be added to enhance value. Autonomous educators have a wealth of educationalists to draw on to refute that either education itself or their own children are products. This being the case it is easier to argue that the whole notion of testing is flawed.

Autonomous educators are acutely aware that the demarcation lines between 'education' and 'not education' are at least blurred if not downright false. The only person with privileged access to a mind is the person themselves and to label a child doing a sheet of maths problems as 'learning' whilst we write off the child playing with sticks in a river as idling and 'not learning' is merely arrogant, unsubstantiated assumption making. More profoundly we know from general experience that a great deal of learning is inexplicit; we may not be aware of the learning taking part even in our minds and certainly not



immediately, so to presume that we can neatly divide the world up into learning and non learning experiences is nonsense.

Of course learning is not a matter of magic, mystical hocus pocus and we should have some rational way of knowing that it is taking place, even if we can't have privileged access to other minds or second guess learning's every stage. What we observe is whether or not a child is intrinsically motivated to pursue an activity; whether it is an activity that the child values and enjoys, is, I would suggest, just the indicator we are looking for. The real test for whether something is 'educational' might be whether it is fun or not for that person at that time.

The problem with demarcating life into so called educational and none educational activities and presuming that we can test for the former is that it totally ignores inexplicit learning and underestimates even the explicit learning that can arise from activities we don't normally value as educational. Testing demands that we know explicitly how many units of learning and how many units of fun we gain from each activity as independent measures in each case. However it could actually be hypothesized that thinking we get 10 units of learning from a math lecture and only 5 units of learning from doing something we explicitly enjoy (like watching a TV show) is because we have taken on false ideas that tell us that learning is about hard work and endurance, whilst fun is self indulgent froth that often does us no good. In other words our explicit ways of measuring might be irrational because this is an area where coercion has been hard at work in the lives of individuals and cultures, preventing us from seeing outside the narrowly defined confines of the mainstream educational box.

Since much of learning is inexplicit, and so not readily susceptible to explicit or immediate measures, we may need alternative hypotheses to help us relate fun and learning - it might be that wanting to do something (which probably includes a large dose of 'fun' broadly defined) is the measure of how much learning we are taking from the thing (both explicit learning and all the inexplicit learning that we may not normally count when thinking about how much we learned from activity A or activity B).

On this hypothesis if activity A generates 10 measures of fun, and 5 learning (in the sense of explicit, obvious learning), whilst activity B generates 5 measures of fun, but 10 of these explicit obvious units of learning then we might deduce:

a) that A and B each generate 15 units overall and so are equally learning experiences or,

b) or we might hypothesize further that the fun units are 'worth' more than the obviously measurable learning units since the fun units relate to our inexplicit theories and intrinsic motivation, which is both harder to second guess and much more basic to real learning. Say for instance we give 'fun' a value of 3 to a ratio of 1 for every unit of explicit, measurable learning. In this case A generates 10 measures of fun (that's 30 points), and 5 of learning (in the sense of explicit, obvious learning), giving a 'score' of 35, whilst B generates 10 explicit obvious units of learning and only 5 measures of fun (15 points) giving a score of 25. Both fun and learning are measures relating to intrinsic motivation and fun may well be a very fine indicator of learning taking place in a particular person.

The notion that all learning is explicit and testable seems to be at the heart of curriculum driven education used widely in schools and education authorities are often shocked and perplexed at the idea that home educators think this sort of testing irrelevant or even



detrimental to real learning. Of course we can't actually assign specific numerical values to the processes in someone else's mind to measure the levels of fun or learning, but we can certainly challenge the notion that education is what you can test on the surface and we can make very good guesses that preferences, self fulfillment (as defined by the learner), delight and interest are not merely as good, but superior tests that learning is taking place.

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