

## Review of the Research Literature



The most comprehensive research undertaken recently in the UK was by Paula Rothermel at Durham University.

Rothermel undertook a three-year study of 1,000 families concentrating on children under 11 and, in particular on 415 families. The research concentrated on tests for psychological stability, academic attainment and social skills. It showed that whilst 14% of parents interviewed had some teacher training home educating parents were more likely to come from manual and semi-skilled backgrounds and, contrary to most educational research findings, lower social class did not equate with poorer performance in children; in fact the reverse was often true. Over half of the families were electively home educating because of some shortfall or perceived shortfall in the education offered by schools. Rothermel found that home-educated children demonstrated high levels of literacy in comparison to national attainments, even though many home educators described themselves as 'late readers'. Overall, the children demonstrated high levels of attainment and social skills. Rothermel noted that a positive and secure environment, individual attention, the absence of peer pressure and the opportunity to learn through talk all contributed to positive outcomes.

(Paula Rothermel, *A Nation-wide Study of Home Education in Education Now: 25 Years of Home-Based Education*, 2001) A summaries of her work is available here

According to further work by Rothermel there could be as many as 560,600 children of compulsory school age in the UK not attending any form of school

Rothermel P. *The Third Way in Education: Thinking the Unthinkable* March 2000, *Education* Volume 28, No.1,

pp. 3-13 Trentham Books

Rothermel has also completed research comparing 4-5 year old home educated children with school educated children's attainment. She concludes that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds scored higher than those from more affluent backgrounds. Home educated children demonstrated high levels of ability and social skills. In particular children benefited from the individual attention their families were able to offer. Home educated children performed above the national mean performance in both reading and mathematics.

Rothermel P "Comparisons of home and school educated children on PIPS baseline assessments." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* vol2(3) pp273-299 issn: 1476-718x

Before Rothermel's research, Alan Thomas conducted research with home educating families in London and Australia. Thomas found that educational style and philosophy became increasingly informal with greater experience of home education. He also found that:

children learn to read in innumerable ways and without difficulty

go on to read voraciously

Often learn in an 'higgledy-piggledy' fashion without an apparent need for sequencing

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in some cases seem to just pick up knowledge, including maths

often pursue a topic for days if the interest holds

can be wrong without losing face

have the confidence and familiarity to challenge if they do not understand or disagree

are socially skilled and seem to enjoy high self esteem.

Thomas' work challenges the assumption that children require formal teaching in favour of a 'learning by living' approach which centres on the individual.

(Roland Meighan, 'Research Report: Home-based education learning methods' in *Education Now: 25 Years of Home-Based Education*, 2001. See also, *Educating Children at Home*, Alan Thomas, Cassell 1998).

Leslie Barson's work "Communities of Practice and Home Education Support Groups" examines home education support groups as 'communities of practice' (E. Wenger). A community of practice is a group that has a "joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire". She examines how home educating families interact within the setting of support structures, how they decide which structures to use and how they function as groups. Although most of her findings echo the current PEN research work, there are also some significant differences. She finds that US research suggests that 85% of home educators use or intend to use local support groups, whereas my own research in the UK suggests that this figure may be much lower in Britain than in America. This may reflect the differences in educational styles and cultural differences between the US and UK home education communities. However her finding that many parents place a lot of emphasis upon the work of local groups is supportable, particularly in the early stages of home education when they are less informed and lacking in confidence and therefore they require more support. She also emphasises the importance of the interaction between the family's educational style or philosophical approach and the group philosophy. She notes that parents will continue engagement with a local or national group provided the compromises to private family life don't outweigh the benefits of membership.

Trevena Whitbread's undergraduate degree dissertation in 2004 was on the subject of home educated children's access to university. She contacted 30 universities of which 27 said that they would be happy to interview home educated young people to discuss their achievements with them before making a decision on offers. All of these were open to non standard applications without the usual matriculation requirements, whereas only three universities said that they would require specific qualifications.

Another study that uses case histories is by Julie Webb, written up in 'Those Unschooled Minds: Home Educated children grow up' (Educational Heretics Press 1999).

Webb's sample groups reflect a very participatory and involved view of education, leading to positive approaches to lifetime education. Whilst some of the children were home

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educated in structured and formal ways the preponderance of families employed highly informal methods, but, whatever the individual methods settled on by families, the common thread was that the sample group became well adjusted, flexible adults participating a wide range of employment and ongoing education.

Dr T Arora's "Research Report on Home Education in Kirklees" is reviewed here.

Roland Meighan

has contributed a great deal to the literature on and research into Home based education. In his recent publication 'Learning Unlimited' (Educational Heretics Press 2001) he profiles a number of case studies. What stands out amongst the disparate stories is the ability to be highly responsive to individual learning needs and the role of intrinsic motivation. In his next publication, 'Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum' Meighan develops the tag line, 'anybody, any age; any time, any place: any pathway, any pace'. Building on earlier research (The Next Learning System Educational Heretics Press, 1997) Meighan notes the question for home based education research has moved on. It is no longer, 'Can children educated at home match the performance of children educated in school?', but rather, 'Why were home educated children so successful?' Meighan answers this throughout the book, but his findings are summed up In terms of home education's ability to:

create a learner friendly environment (also noted by Rothermel)

exploit an information rich society at will

use one of the most powerful methods of learning, i.e. conversation. This idea of the power of purposive conversation is emphasised by both Meighan and Thomas.

Build on early successes of helping children to learn. In other words there is a natural progression from helping toddlers to walk and talk to helping children to read and learn even the most complex concepts.

Discover the catalogue curriculum. The 'catalogue curriculum' is Meighan's term for intrinsically motivated, individualised learning, again highlighted by Thomas and Rothermel as foundational to the success of home based education.

As well as research findings, recent literature in the field of home education has confirmed a growing and philosophically maturing educational movement over the last decade. There is a new wealth of literature detailing the methods of delivery of home educating and fleshing out the research findings.

(cf. Fortune-Wood, *Doing it Their Way*, Educational Heretics Press, 2000;

Meighan, 'The Next Learning System', 1997; 'Learning Unlimited' 2001; 'Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum' 2001, all published by Educational Heretics Press;

Dowty (ed) *Free Range Education*, Hawthorne Press, 2000)

Research From around the World

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This research is supported by a mass of research findings in the United States.

The National Home Education Research Institute has published a research journal in the States for over twenty years, establishing a considerable bank of data. Although, for cultural reasons, not of all of the research translates to the British context, there does exist a wealth of material that indicates highly achieving educational outcomes, positive social and psychological development, high rates of employment and entrepreneurial outlook. This is certainly the conclusion drawn by Brian Ray from the National Home Education Research Institute in his study of 1657 families including 5402 children across 50 states. (Strengths of Their Own: home schoolers across America) Ray notes that in his sample 86% of families use computers and attribute a significant positive difference to this in their educational outcomes and that 71% design their own learning from a range of resources rather than using pre-written curricula.

The US Census Bureau produced original research entitled Home-Schooling in the United States: Trends and Characteristics 2001 This startling research suggests that there could be as many as 2,000,000 children being home educated in the USA a figure which they acknowledge is growing at around 20% per annum. They also suggest that home education could have a disproportionate impact upon the nation due to the innovative nature of home educational practice and the effect this innovation is having upon the institutional education system. It speculates that home educators may in the future create small schools or that mainstream school may become suppliers of advanced courses which by their nature may be difficult to provide in the home.

The Fraser Institute in Canada published a report called "Home Schooling from Extreme to mainstream" (165K pdf download) and in summery here. This research relies heavily upon US research and is highly damning of the public education system both in the USA and Canada. This is one of the best sources of research into home education in the USA.

This research examines the history and regulation of home education and has some interesting figures on achievement in the US and Canada. Finding that home educated children perform well compared to their schooled peers both in terms of academic performance and socialisation for a fraction the cost and that regulation makes little difference in performance.

The Federation of Teaching Parents of Ontario examined the social behaviours of Public versus home educated children to examine the issue of socialisation "Social Behaviors: Public vs. Home Educated Children" and the assumptions made by many officials that home educated children are not offered the opportunity to develop socially.

The FOTPOO also compared SAT's results for home educated students with public school students for the year 1998. This research found that children taught at home out performed state educated children on such tests. here

A nationwide study of home education: early indications and wider implications

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Several hundred children participated in this first national assessment programme of children educated, electively, outside the school system, Education Now, Summer 1999, No. 24

<http://www.ontariohomeschool.org/study.html>

"Investigating Young Children's Perceptions of Homeschooling" Interview based research from 1998 where children were asked about their views and experiences of home education.

Homeschooling - Back to the Future? Published by the Cato Institute, Policy Analysis No. 294, January 7, 1998. examined the growing numbers of home educated children attending Universities and concluded that home education could produce superior results at a fraction of the cost to the state.

Homeschooling and the Redefinition of Citizenship by Bruce Arai of Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo; Volume 7, Number 27, September 6, 1999, Education Policy Analysis Archives (EPAA). Examined another aspect of socialisation. It asked the question Can home educated children become good citizens without going to school? It concludes that citizenship to home educated adults is different but a valid approach.

Lawrence M Rudner in Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students 1998 . In the context of British home education research it indicates that there are both significant differences and similarities between home education in the UK and home schooling in the US. In terms of how home education is conducted and the demographics of home educating families. In the US over 14% of families had an income in excess of \$75,000 and nearly a third had an income of over \$50,000. While less than 25% had an income of less than \$25,000. In contrast, in the UK 36% of home educating families are on earnings related benefits. In the UK 43% of families earn less than £20,000, 74% of families have less than £30,000 and 88% of families have less than £40,000. In short British families are far poorer than US families. However over 75% of US families spend less than \$600 per annum on home education. The median spending was around \$400. Probably not much greater than a middle class family with school age children in school would spend supplementing their school education. He also found that home educated children achieved grade 6 work on average three years in advance of the national average age and around one and a half years ahead of private and catholic schooled children in the US. This held true for all subjects.