

# HOME EDUCATION IN BRITAIN

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So far in this series of essays, I have referred to the British school system as being “compulsory”, with the implication that every young person between the ages of five and sixteen is forced by law to attend full-time either a state or a “private” school. As informed readers will already know, this is not strictly speaking a statement of the legal position, and I used the word for the sake of simplicity. The Education Act 1944 said, “It shall be the duty of the parent of every child of compulsory school age to cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude (and any special needs), either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.”<sup>1</sup> Those last two words were perhaps the last ghost of the 19th century educational free market which the government had forcibly extinguished. Certainly they have provided families with a lawful form of escape from both state schools and the horrors of the public school system.

In 1952 Joy Baker, a Norfolk-based mother of four, decided to educate her children at home. Over the following ten years of expensive legal struggle she was twice fined and once sentenced to prison for two months, and her children were made, and then unmade, wards of court. In one court case, the magistrates tested one of her sons on his knowledge. They asked what was in a camel’s hump; he replied that it was fat, and they answered that it was water. When the boy asked them to look it up, they had to admit that he was right. However, the court still found that Mrs Baker was not satisfactorily educating her son.

Finally, however, in 1962, an appeal court ruled that she was indeed providing the children with a suitable education. Thus was the precedent established which permitted parents to educate at home. By 1977, ten families were educating at home, and established Education Otherwise, an organisation for mutual support. Today, 12,000 families in Britain are involved in home education, and only a few local authorities create serious difficulties for them, including Trafford, Barking, Durham, Enfield and Tower Hamlets. The law now is that parents wishing to home-educate from scratch need simply start doing so; those who wish to take their children out of school must prove to the local authority that the education they provide will be satisfactory. According to Dick Kitto, a co-founder of Education Otherwise,

We seem to cater for three categories of family. The first is the dissatisfied parent, perhaps intellectual and middle-class, who wants what school offers, but better.

The second category are the potential dropouts. They don’t approve of where society is going, or the part that education plays in this, and they want to stop their kids being institutionalised. They are an anarchic element who reject school and society.

The third group, from whom most of our inquiries come, are the ordinary people who are forced to think about education when they find that their children are not benefiting from school. These families are not basically committed to taking their children out of school, but they are driven by desperation.<sup>2</sup>

In home education, the young person’s learning proceeds according to his or her own interests and wishes, and not those of any external authority. There are therefore as many learning processes as there are individual young people. While young people educated at home often choose to take GCSEs and other examinations, including those for

“real-world” trades such as electronics, fire-fighting, cookery, carpentry, beauty and computer programming, they take them when they feel ready for them, and not according to somebody else’s schedule. For example, Tom Ball, aged 15, from a village near Huntingdon, got top marks in O level mathematics at 12, additional mathematics at 13 and physics at 14, then did electronics and chemistry GCSEs in one year, part-time, at the local technical college while taking biology and environmental studies at home — all this before his schooled contemporaries have sat a single examination. According to his mother, Betty,

My trouble is that I’m anti-expert. Schools have to teach things at set times, and you can learn incredibly efficiently if the moment is right and you want to, but incredibly inefficiently if it just happens to be maths because it’s three o’clock on Tuesday.

His father, David, says,

What we really believe in is choice. We’d like parents and children to be able to take what they choose from the institution. The ideal is to educate children within the community, but based at home.

Mrs Ball concludes,

I want my children to be numerate and literate, and I don’t want them growing up to think that if there’s a problem, someone else will solve it. I want them to think, ‘Who better to solve it than me?’<sup>3</sup>

Home-educated young people have enormous educational advantages over their contemporaries in school. According to Dr Roland Meighan, lecturer in education at Birmingham University, who is the country’s leading academic expert on home education,

[C]hildren with full access to our information-rich society are likely to do better than those squabbling over two tatty textbooks in the day-prison called school.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of a 12-year study of 5,000 home-educating families, Dr Meighan concludes that “All the children I see are stars in some way or other.”<sup>5</sup> Home-educated Sally Hornsby, aged 15, several times went to school for a term to compare her progress with that of her schooled contemporaries. Not only did she know more about them in subjects she had studied, but she even outdid them in French and science, which she had never studied, and which they had been learning for three years.<sup>6</sup>

## DIFFICULT TO COERCE, BUT STRONG

To gain a flavour of the home education movement in Britain, let us examine some of the opinions of parents involved in it. Mike Cook, of Herne Bay, Kent, father of six, is sceptical of school socialisation: “All this peer-group pressure is behind soccer hooliganism.” His wife, Lois, says, “I really don’t think you can have a single curriculum. Children and their interests are so very different.”<sup>7</sup> According to Liz Hornsby, a child psychologist and home-educating parent, of a village near Loughborough:

People think of home educating families as being stuck at home all day, but in fact you are freer to go and stay with other EO families, make expeditions and so on than people with children in school. It is when you have to do the school run four times a day that you are really stuck. I do have to do a fair bit of ferrying around to make sure they see other children, but all country parents have to do that, and luckily there are several home educated girls of my daughter Carly’s age nearby.<sup>8</sup>

A home-educating mother of four says,

What it comes down to is that they’ve spent the bulk of their childhood enjoying themselves, doing what they wanted to do. They are difficult to coerce, but once they decide to do something, they are very strong about doing it.<sup>9</sup>

Home education offers the opportunity for exceptionally capable young people to develop at their own pace. For example, the mathematical prodigies Ruth Lawrence and Ganesh Sittampalam, both of whom gained first-class degrees in mathematics at the age of 13

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(from Oxford and Surrey Universities respectively) were educated at home. So also was Caitlin Moran, of Wolverhampton, the eldest of eight home-educated children, who is an award-winning novelist at the age of 17. According to Ms Moran, whose education began after she left school at the age of 11,

The worst thing about school is that you tend to compromise your own personality to fit in with other people — I think it psychologically stunts you. Everybody copies the worst person; and it's always the sarcastic ones who triumph. It's all about trying to survive — if you get out intact you have proved yourself. But you shouldn't have to prove yourself at the age of seven ...

At school you have to write to satisfy someone else's ideas. I remember doing an essay on my home, and the foxes and rabbits in the fields around, and the teacher said, 'Very good, but I think a nice last line would be "and these creatures are all God's animals" ...'

She writes of her parents,

Their attitude is that we can do anything we like as long as we don't hurt or inconvenience anyone else. And politeness is a part of that — of trying to get on with everyone else in the world.<sup>10</sup>

### “I HATE SCHOOL”

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of compulsory schooling is the way in which the entire system is established and operated according to “the needs of the average child” — a figment of the imagination of some bureaucrat. The system of central planning seeks to coerce millions of unique human beings into this collectivist model, rather than allowing their development as free and different individuals — and in so doing commits one of the greatest imaginable atrocities against the human mind. A minority of young people, however, can by no stretch of the imagination be included in the fraudulent concept of “the average child”, and the home education movement at least allows such individuals the possibility of escape from the bureaucrats' regime. This minority includes not only the most intelligent young people, but also those arbitrarily classified as “educationally challenged” or some other euphemism aimed at devaluing the individual. Let us examine how the home education movement has helped two un-“average” young people.

When Matthew Crippen was three years old, a Harley Street educational psychologist described him as “the most gifted under-five I've ever tested”.<sup>11</sup> His parents — in their naivete — had him admitted to school at the age of four with a class of six-year-olds. He found the tasks at school absurdly easy. According to his mother, Gill,

Yes, he could multiply and divide when he went to school. He couldn't understand why a six-year-old was still drawing a picture of the sun with a face on it. He said: 'Don't they realise it's a star?' — but the more he said, the more he was disliked.<sup>12</sup>

The dislike turned into physical assaults, with Matthew frequently returning home with large bruises on his face. His personality changed, and he became grumpy, aggressive and unmotivated. His mother recalls,

You would ask him a question and he'd just say 'Don't know' or 'Can't do it', whereas before he was inventing things. I once showed him how magnets attract and repel, and 10 minutes later he said; 'Can't we build an engine and make the pistons go up and down using electro-magnets?'

She continued,

He was really miserable and it got to the stage where he started running out of school. He was four years old and it's three miles away, but he said he'd rather walk round the streets than go in there. He'd be screaming and shouting. The teachers just said: 'Never mind, he'll grow out of it, he'll adjust, it takes time.'<sup>13</sup>

But his parents — neither of whom have any teaching qualifications — removed him from the school and started educating him at home, along with his younger sister, Sarah, with the support of Education Otherwise. Their father, Steve, says,

We just learn as we go. We learn with the child. Knowledge has to come from somewhere; all educated people have to learn from books ... it's just as easy for us to go to that source and find out. The teacher who teaches the teachers reads it somewhere.<sup>14</sup>

Matthew himself writes:

I hate school. ...The maths was far too easy. I had to count BUCKETS! Another boy bullied me all the time. He made me close my eyes and then he'd punch me in the face. He told lies. He was jealous of me because I could do the work and he

couldn't. ... In EO there are no bullies, just friends. The work is 10 times harder at home which is much nicer for me. When I was at school I used to scream my head off, now I laugh.<sup>15</sup>

Diana Davenport, who has been a foster mother for 34 years, describes another case:

Roy was two-and-a-half when I met him: a lost boy in a psychiatric hospital, trembling like a man with DTs. Never had I seen such fear in the face of what life might have in store. ... By six he had started at the village primary school. Hysterical panic alternated with ostrich periods of hiding his face. He did not form friendships. ... Knowledge garnered one day evaporated the next. Motivation had no part in his being. And so to secondary school. In spite of current rhetoric, there are few (if any) choices. ... Boys like Roy, out of their depth, are caught in a cycle of frustration. Children at the top of the class can be eight or nine years ahead of the stragglers at the bottom, floundering at kindergarten level. ... Teenagers are not easily won over to compassion for the vulnerable. Ties are flushed down the lavatory, new trainers thrown over the fence, graffiti chalked on blazers. There is endless pushing and shoving and hurtful jokes, “Chinese burns” and “bicycle rides”, bloody noses and throttle marks. For Roy the daily journey in the school bus was a recurring crucifixion. His own often appalling behaviour is typical of an unhappy child attempting to draw attention to his need to be rescued.

So she removed him from school and started educating him at home:

Roy does about 90 minutes a day of relatively hard slog on the basics. We talk a lot, discuss feelings and aims, do the garden, re-organise his room. ... At least once a week we go and look at something interesting: an Iron Age fort, a new-born camel, Shakespeare's Stratford from the top of a bus, a marvellously constructed water garden, the tombstone of a rat-catcher's wife, 1847. ... Whichever way, he knows he will not have to suffer the rack of a written analysis next day. ... Most important is his once-weekly 'work experience' at a butcher's shop where, in a neat striped apron, he washes trays and helps carry carcasses in from the lorry. ... The relief of being excused conventional schooling has opened him up, taken the strain off coping with his contemporaries. ... A large comprehensive can be a killer. Let nobody imagine that integration can be poured willy-nilly, like mystic custard, over human differences.<sup>16</sup>

### THE LEGAL RIGHT TO PAY ONLY ONCE

While the home education movement will have the enthusiastic support of all libertarians for its continued growth and success, one must draw attention to the factors which at present limit its benefits to only a tiny minority of young people. First, it requires at least one parent to put in a virtually superhuman effort to provide all aspects of the education of the young people concerned, quite apart from all the other activities of adult and family life. Many parents are unable to do this, and require the advantages of the division of labour to educate their children; as a result, they currently have to rely on schools. Second, while high technology is not absolutely essential for an educational free market, considerable capital investment will be required on the supply side (we have already looked at multimedia technology) which currently is beyond the means of most families. Third, families which educate at home do not get a refund on the taxes they have already paid for schooling; they are, in other words, paying twice for education. An educational free market will require, as its most fundamental principle, that the money everybody currently pays in taxes to the school bureaucracy must be handed back to the individual to spend on the education he or she wants, from the suppliers he or she wants, when he or she wants. Individuals must, as the first step towards such a free market, have the legal right to walk out of school, taking their share of the school's budget with them, just as an individual who is dissatisfied with the services of a shop, restaurant or hotel is free to walk out and spend his or her money on another supplier.

### NOTES

1. Quoted in *Daily Telegraph*, magazine section, 8th September 1990, p. 55.
2. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 52.
3. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 56.
4. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 53.
5. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 59.
6. *Ibid*, p. 55.
7. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 53.
8. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 55.
9. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 59.
10. *Daily Telegraph*, “You and Your Family” section 24 July 1992, p. 14.
11. Quoted in *Independent on Sunday*, magazine section, 9th August 1992, p. 43.
12. Quoted in *ibid*.
13. Quoted in *ibid*.
14. Quoted in *ibid*.
15. Quoted in *ibid*.
16. *Daily Telegraph*, 21 May 1992, p. 16.