

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

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HOME EDUCATION AND UNSCHOOLING OR AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

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I am a developmental psychologist with a particular interest in how children learn. I embarked on home education research while I was a Senior Lecturer at Charles Darwin University. I have since undertaken research into home education over a period of 20+ years, mainly in Australia and the UK and, most recently, worldwide, covering at least 400 families. My research has been published in refereed academic journals and books which have also been published in German and French. I have briefed governments prior to home education legislation in Australia (Victoria and Tasmania), the UK, the Republic of Ireland and educational authorities in many European countries.

When I embarked on my research into home education I expected to see timetables, parents preparing and teaching lessons, setting and assessing written work, in other words following a school model. Instead I found a very broad range of educational approaches. A number of parents conformed to what I expected. There were also many parents who allowed their children to determine their own educational path and to acquire an education through what they learnt in the course of their day-to-day lives and by following their own interests, parents having the role of mentor, interlocutor and resource provider. This kind of education is known variously as unschooling, natural, autonomous or informal learning.

Learning informally and autonomously will be unfamiliar to the vast majority of professional educators who view a structured education and planned, sequential teaching as essential. On the other hand, everyone knows that virtually all children informally acquire a massive amount of knowledge and skills in and around the home during the preschool years.

There is no reason why children should not go on learning in the same vein after they reach school age, as my research clearly demonstrates. Some key areas

including the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and computer/IT skills are learned not by having lessons in these areas but during the course of everyday activities at home and in the wider community. For example, many children learn to read and become numerate with very little if any of the kind of teaching which may be essential in school.

There is little doubt that autonomous and informal education will, at the very least, meet the requirements of mainstream school, certainly through the primary and well into the secondary years. It has grown rapidly over the last 20 years or so and is practised by an increasing number of home educators throughout the world.

Normative, age related measures of progress used in school will not apply when children learn what interests them and at their own pace. Subject matters addressed at home can vary widely and often encompass skills and areas of knowledge not included on the school curriculum. We have found that some children follow passionate interests for years, going deeply into their subject matter.

We have come across children with deep subject knowledge, far in advance of what they would be feasible in school. Examples include the Russian Revolution, computing, aeronautics, chemistry, cookery, jewellery making, creative writing, Japanese culture, boat design and a wide variety of craft and technical skills such as spinning, weaving, bee keeping and welding – the variety is truly astonishing. We also found children pursuing music and sports to quite high levels as well as for recreational purposes. Whether interests are short lived or pursued to a high degree they provide a vehicle for the development of thinking skills, critical analysis, problem solving, creativity and self-expression.

These children have little or no difficulty in embarking on formal education when they enrol in mainstream education, whether in school or later in secondary college in Grade 11. They may not have covered the same areas as their school peers, mainly because they will have followed their own interests. However, their educational experience will be at least as broad and will have prepared them very well for mainstream education at whatever age they start. Universities are increasingly finding that home educated children make good students because they are more used to independent study. Harvard actually reserves places for home educated students.

I strongly recommend that autonomous and informal learning be recognised in any future legislation and be incorporated into any subsequent guidelines.

Selected publications

Books

Thomas, A. (1998) Educating Children at Home, London, Cassell.

German translation: Bildung zu Haus: ein sinnvolle alternative, Tologo Verlag, Leipzig

Thomas, A. & Pattison, H. (2008) How Children Learn at Home, Continuum International Publishing Group.

French translation: A l'école de la vie, les apprentissages informels sous le regard des sciences de l'éducation Editions L'Instant Présent, Paris (2013)

German translation: Informelles Lernen, Tologo Verlag, Leipzig, 2014

Pattison, H. & Thomas, A. Rethinking Literacy: home educated children learning to read (Bloomsbury, London, in preparation)

Articles

Thomas, A. (1992) Individualized teaching", *Oxford Review of Education*, 18, pp. 59-74.

Thomas, A. (1994) Conversational Learning, *Oxford Review of Education*, 1994, 20, pp. 131-142.

Thomas, A. & Pattison, H. (2013) Informal home education: philosophical aspirations put into practice. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 32, 141-154

Thomas, A. & Pattison, H. (2014) "Informal home education and the development of literacy" In: P.Rothermel (Ed): Intercultural perspectives on home based education. Palgrave Macmillan.

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