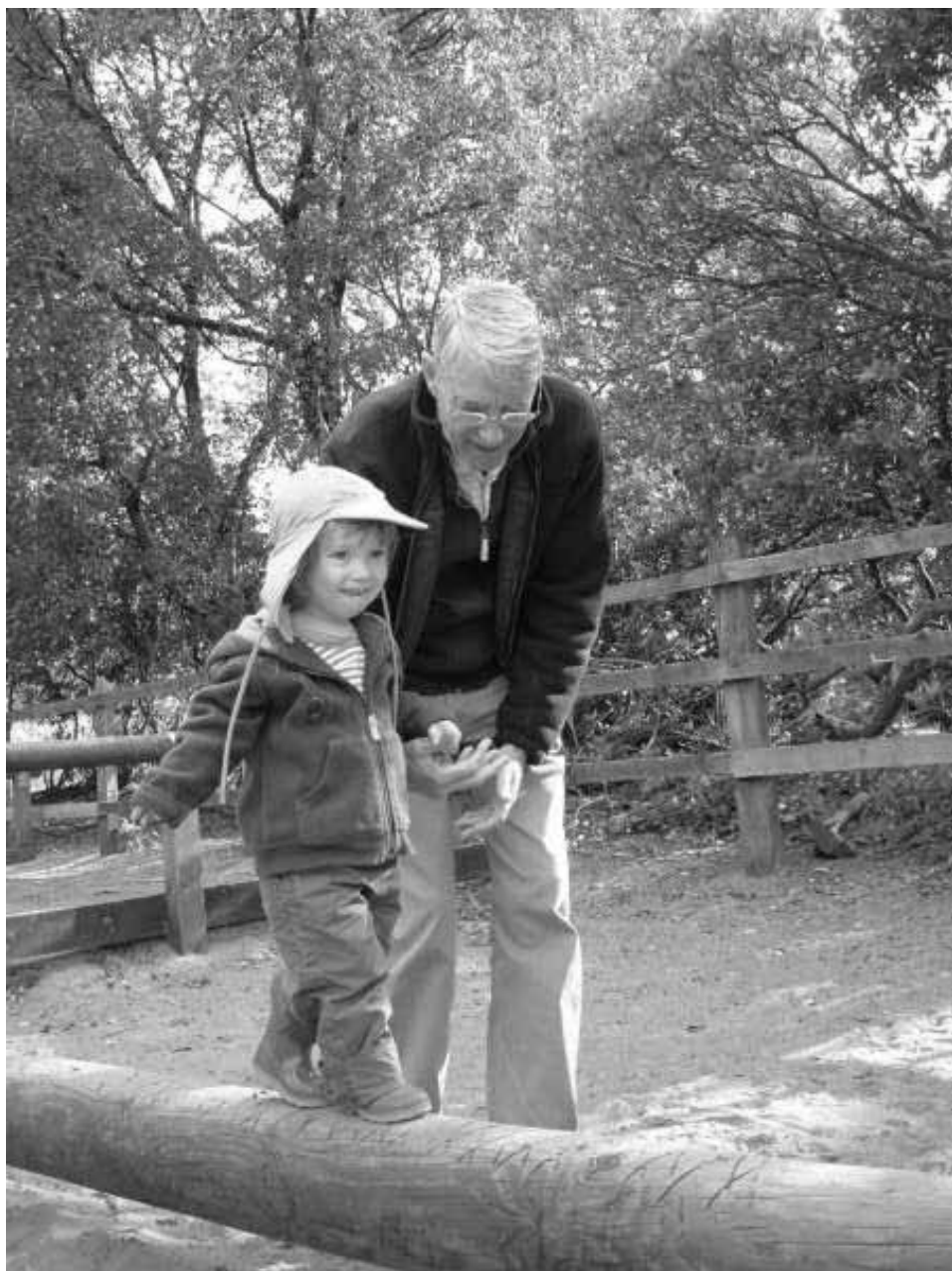


English Home Educators Under Threat: *Time for a Stand of Principled Non-compliance?*



By Dr Richard House

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According to a BBC news report on the 11th June, 2009, a new report is proposing that home-educating families

in England will soon have to register annually by law, and demonstrate that they are providing a "suitable education". The British government had asked the interestingly named Graham Badman, Kent's former Director of Children's Services, to see if local authorities were monitoring and supporting home-educating families effectively. In what the *Guardian* newspaper of 11 June ominously reported as "plans for a major toughening-up of the regulation of home education", the government has accepted in full the findings of its commissioned review; and

in what is now a familiar refrain, we read the Secretary of State for Children, Ed Balls, responding to the report with the extraordinary statement that "I am today launching a public consultation on these proposals *so that* they can be introduced to Parliament at the earliest possible opportunity" (my italics) ~ so in true government Newspeak style, "consultation" comes to mean a rubber-stamping exercise for what the government has already decided it's going to do. Indeed, some have even suggested, with good reason, that this was the case even *before* the "review" was launched on 19 January, 2009.

From the pedagogical point of view, the report recommends that children be sent back to school if parents do not meet certain educational "standards" ~ to which I return later. The compulsory registration scheme would be administered by local councils, which will visit parents intending to home educate, within one month of registration. *At the time of registration*, parents and guardians would have to "provide a clear statement of their educational approach, intent and desired outcomes for the child over the following twelve months", the report says. One could hardly imagine a more effective way of dissuading parents from even starting out on the challenging task of home educating, with the prospect of being inserted into the state's "audit and surveillance culture" before they've even started; and one could also be forgiven for the cynical conclusion that this is indeed one of the government's intentions.

Moreover (and it gets worse), "They will be judged on their plans. These statements should contain some milestones for children to achieve", Mr Badman went on. Thus, "At the age of eight they should be reasonably autonomous learners, competent in handling numbers, with rudimentary ICT levels and able to read. I'm calling for setting some parameters." Whilst Mr Badman is reported not to wish to be overly prescriptive regarding what constituted a suitable education, he has asked the government to review a statutory definition, and said parents would be judged against their education plans! I return to this issue below; but as one poster on the *Guardian* website poignantly remarked, "This kind of target and

assessment may be required if you teach a school full of kids, but for home educators would make autonomous learning difficult, if not impossible”.

The Department for Children, Families and Schools’ website provided further information in a press release,¹ under the title “Better Monitoring and Support for Home Educated Children in England”. We are told that the review took into account the opinions and evidence supplied by home educating parents, local authorities and organisations concerned with child protection such as NSPCC and 11 Million. Yet the extent to which the views of home educating parents *per se* have been taken into account (in contrast to the views of the institutional child-protection industry) is open to considerable doubt. Graham Badman is also quoted as saying that “I am confident [the recommendations] will... aid home educators in their task”. As will become clear below, such an exercise in (spin-driven?) reassurance is, at the very least, open to considerable doubt.

The Children’s Minister, Delyth Morgan, is also quoted as saying: “Most home educators do a fantastic job, and I want to ensure they get more support from Local Authorities. But we can’t afford to let any child slip through the net ~ in terms of their education, or safety.” I will submit these claims to searching examination below; but at this point we can merely note that it doesn’t seem to have even crossed the minister’s mind that it might be *precisely because* home educators have extricated themselves from the state’s educational embrace that they are doing such a “fantastic” job! (her term).

In a revealing footnote to the departmental press release, we also find an acknowledgement that “some parents... indicated that they have removed their children from state education because of lack of provision for children with special educational needs”. And on the same day as the release of the report, we read further of the Government’s plans to provide better support for children with special educational needs, with “Ed Balls announc[ing] today a pioneering c31m [*sic*] project, Achievement for All. The project will pilot innovative teaching and support for young people with special educational needs (SEN) in 10 local authorities and 450 schools ~ including better assessment of children to close the big achievement gaps, and more engagement with parents by schools.” It is also acknowledged that many families opt for home education because of bullying. No surprise, then, when we read, further, that “The Government

has provided over £3 million to help tackle bullying this year alone, and current policy gives schools the tough powers they need to take action. Every school must have policies in place to prevent and tackle bullying, and our support for schools offers a range of proven strategies developed by the major anti-bullying experts.” In short, *this report and press release clearly constitute a thinly-veiled attempt to persuade parents who have decided to withdraw their children from state education that the government is making changes to the system such that they will no longer need to do so.* (It should also be noted that many have kept their sons and daughters out of school because they believe formal education starts too early in this country ~ but that’s another story altogether.)

From the pedagogical viewpoint, if the government were making a splendid job of running the rest of the education system, there could perhaps be some conceivable rationale for new statutory intervention like this into the lives of home educators. But just one massive irony of all this is that it is commonly precisely those families who strongly feel that the state has made a veritable “pig’s ear” of their children’s schooling system that



have opted out of institutional schooling to escape from the toxicity of mainstream schooling; yet if these proposed changes go through, those families will now have no choice but to be subject to state intrusion into the education of their children ~ which many will, quite understandably, find absolutely intolerable.

There are other problems, too. First, when the government proposes statutory interventions like this, they commonly make no attempt whatsoever to make any serious assessment of the *unintended side-effects* of their proposed intervention. Thus, research has shown that children in home-educated families often have far better educational outcomes than the norm (see below); and many, if not most, of those families would argue strongly that this is because they are free of the controlling central government diktat in the education realm. But what if this mooted state intervention so compromises what works so successfully in home education, that the damage to home-educated children's learning experience and outcomes in general wrought by the changes dwarfs any lessening of abuse that the new regime might successfully root out? ~ for it was wild claims about possible levels of child abuse in home educating families that precipitated this review in the first place.

It seems that we currently live in an increasingly centralised political culture where if there's even the whiff of a possibility of abuse, the state feels that it has to intervene, no matter what the wider negative effects of its intervention might be. Moreover, as one incisively eloquent *Guardian* website poster argued, "it is a fallacy that schooled children are 'seen' and home educated children are 'unseen', other than with reference to/by teachers. Home educated children I know are rarely at home!... Cases of awful abuse shouldn't factor in this; where there are concerns of abuse in *any* family (home educating or not), or in any institutional setting, the legislation is rightly in place to help address this swiftly. A better understanding and implementation of the law in this is what is needed, not adding to the workload of overstretched workers for families where all is well, diverting attention from those in need."

Also, just where is the evidence that there are any greater levels or likelihood of abuse amongst home educated children, compared, for example, with the appalling levels of abuse and bullying that many thousands of children suffer daily in mainstream institutional schooling? It seems quite clear that the state should only intervene to fix something if there is clear, unambiguous evidence that something

needs fixing. I have it on good authority that the so-called Expert Reference Group responsible for this report did not contain even one member who might have been expected to know about the current state of research on home education; i.e. this group had no effective expertise on home education, and seems to have been populated, for the most part, by the heads of the child protection industry (who, of course, have their own agendas and vested institutional interests). Acting on anecdote or fear just isn't good enough, when what is so precious and delicate as home education can be irreparably damaged beyond all recognition by clumsy, wrong-headed state intervention.

One also wonders what account the Reference Group took of the kind of research evidence published in the recent book by Alan Thomas and Harriet Pattison (of the Institute of Education, London), titled *How Children Learn at Home*.^{2,3} They found that with home educating families there is no curriculum or sequential teaching, nor are there any lessons, textbooks, requirements for written work, practice exercises, marking or testing. The book argues that home education is a viable alternative to school, concluding that informal learning at home is an "astonishingly efficient way to learn", as good if not better than school for many children. It refers to "the ease, naturalness and immense intellectual potential of informal learning".

Most of the 70 surveyed children were British, with a few from Ireland, Australia and Canada. The authors discovered that these children absorbed information mainly by "doing nothing, observing, having conversations, exploring, and through self-directed learning". They liken the "chaotic nature" of informal learning to the process that leads to scientific breakthroughs, the early stages of crafting a novel, coming up with a solution to a technical problem, or the act of composing music. They continue, "Its products are often intangible, its processes obscure, its progress piecemeal... There are false starts, unrelated bits and pieces picked up, interests followed and discarded, sometimes to be taken up again, sometimes not... Yet the chaotic nature of the informal curriculum does not appear to be a barrier to children organising it into a coherent body of knowledge." In short, "the lack of information quality-control does not appear to lead to muddled, confused children". And "... rather than presenting knowledge in neat packages, the informal curriculum forces learners to become actively engaged with their information ~ to work with it, move it around, juggle ideas and resolve contradictions... It's

not a static thing contained in a series of educational folders. It is alive and dynamic." With maths, for example, most of what is acquired at the primary level, can be learned as an integral part of everyday concrete activities. In school, maths has to be divorced from the dynamic realities of everyday life."

Why, the researchers ask, do we as a society assume that formal learning needs to take over beyond the age of five? "There is no developmental or educational logic behind the radical change in pedagogy from informal to formal when children start school", Thomas and Pattison argue. Moreover, and contrary to expectations, the surveyed home-educated children had no difficulty entering formal education. The informal curriculum is "as good a preparation as any" for college, university or academic correspondence courses, they argue. "The young people had the personal skills to make the transition with apparent ease."

Contrast the above, thoroughly researched picture of home education, with the government's attitude, summed up in the tell-tale language of the report ~ privileging as it does "*desired outcomes* for the child over the following twelve months... They will be *judged on their plans*. These statements should contain some *milestones for children to achieve*" (my italics). Now here, perhaps, is the nub of the issue ~ for an increasing number of people (including myself) are highly critical of the utilitarian "audit culture", and the appalling damage it has wrought throughout modern education and schooling systems. And it is precisely this noxiously deadening "managerialist" ideology that many, if not most, home educators desperately wish to avoid in their headlong flight from institutional education, and which many actually see as a kind of child abuse from which home education protects their children! Yet if these proposals go through into law, there will now be no escape from it; and in the name of protecting children from abuse, that state will be imposing what, for many home educators, is its own form of abuse, from which it will be impossible to escape ~ and which is an intolerable state of affairs in a so-called free democratic society.

The attempted ministerial justification for there being an abuse problem that needs addressing is pretty threadbare. In a revealing statement on the DCSF website, Minister Ed Balls writes: "The review also found evidence that there is a *small number of cases* where home educated children have suffered harm because safeguarding concerns were not picked up, or not treated with sufficient urgency,



particularly where parents were uncooperative or obstructed local authority investigations.” (my italics) In his letter accepting the report’s recommendations, Minister Ed Balls refers to its “call for urgent action to improve safeguards for home educated children... We accept that Local Authorities need greater powers to monitor home educated children to confirm they are safe and receiving a suitable education... Home educated children must be seen regularly in their education setting, on their own, or with an independent person present as appropriate, so the LA can verify that the evidence of progress presented to them is up to date and accurate and confirm that these children are safe.”

Note, first, the “sledge-hammer to crack a nut” syndrome is in full swing. The report found “a small number of cases” that caused concern. What evidence is adduced to suggest that such abuse that did occur would not have also occurred in an alternative regime? None! What clear, statistically reliable evidence is adduced to show that any abuse that has been identified in home educating families has a greater likelihood of occurring compared with the general population? Again, none. And what attempt is made to show that the negative unintended side-effects of a new stringent surveillance regime for home educators won’t do far more net harm to the overall quality of the field than any reductions in abuse that ensue? Again, none! As one poster on the *Guardian* website put it, “The business about ‘abuse’ is a smokescreen. What Mr Balls is trying to do is institute a regime whereby the curriculum of home education is dictated by central government.”

Graham Badman’s report also recommends that local authorities should provide more *support* to home educating families, e.g., through helping provide access to the national examination system, sports facilities, libraries and music tuition. Yet what is perhaps most revealing in Minister Balls’ letter is that while he fully accepts that the government will implement the intrusive surveillance functions that LEAs will be instructed to implement, when it comes to the one area of the report for which home educators might conceivably be grateful ~ namely, local authorities providing *active support* for home educators ~ suddenly the tone of the letter mysteriously changes, and the level of ministerial enthusiasm for the recommendations diminishes.

Thus we read, “However, this is a difficult and sensitive area, given the wide range of approaches to home education that the team observed, and uncertainties over the number of home educated children and the demand for services.”

In other words, the government will make sure that surveillance of the home education system is ratcheted up, but they won’t promise to improve the learning opportunities that are available for such families to draw upon. As I argued above, this all points to a concerted campaign, a paving of the way to drive as many families as possible back into the maintained institutional schooling system, by a state that, at root, simply cannot bear the challenge to its legitimacy caused by the existence of a thriving and effective home educating system.

There is also a strong and related *ideological* argument against these changes. Just what are the “standards” that the state will impose on home-educating families? It is almost inevitable that they will be the kinds of “modernist”, utilitarian “standards” from which home-educating families have sought to escape! The late French philosopher Louis Althusser argued many years ago that the state apparatus in any country will work to reinforce the status quo and its accompanying ideology. Yet home-educating families are commonly rejecting conventional ideologies (competitiveness, consumerism, materialism, etc.), and working towards making a different kind of world for their children. It is in this sense that home education is part of the counter-culture, and one thing that the state just can’t abide is counter-cultural activity that threatens to undermine its own legitimacy and hegemony, and the prevailing aggressive neo-liberal values that seek to dominate every nook and cranny of our existence.

This is why these proposals are such a matter of concern, and a place where a strong, **principled stand of non-compliance** surely needs to be taken. There are many many thousands of home educators in this country. If they can stand together, and simply refuse to comply with this further example of state colonisation of the private sphere, then it won’t have a hope of succeeding.

This report is likely to unite libertarians from right across the political spectrum, with Dr Sean Gabb of the free-market Libertarian Alliance also coming out very strongly against these “statist” proposals.⁴

Making A Difference...

Those living in England who feel strongly about this issue can make a difference by writing to their local Member of Parliament (details are available from: http://www.parliament.uk/mpslordsandoffices/mps_and_lords/alc.cfm); to The **Rt Hon Edward Michael Balls** MP, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT (dcfs.ministers@dcfs.gsi.gov.uk); and to the Shadow Education Minister **Michael Gove** (at: Michael Gove MP, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA; email GOVEM@parliament.uk; telephone 01276 472468). Minister Ed Balls' Deputy, **Delyth Morgan**, can be reached as follows: Baroness Morgan of Drefelin, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT (dcfs.ministers@dcfs.gsi.gov.uk).

In letters to your local MP, always emphasise in your first sentence, or in the email subject line, that you are her/his constituent; for then, they really do take notice. Letters should preferably be succinct, and should refer to the report "Review of Elective Home Education in England (June 2009) (available at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/download/?id=6080>)

The kind of points worth making can be developed from the arguments in this article, and, of course, from your own experience. It is always more effective if letters are your own and not based on a template.

Note

The report can be downloaded free of charge from; <http://publications.everychildmatters.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=HC+610&>

References

1. "Better Monitoring and Support for Home Educated Children in England", 11 June 2009; downloadable at: http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2009_0105
2. Alan Thomas and Harriet Pattison, *How Children Learn at Home*, Continuum, London, 2008 (£16.99)
3. Jessica Shepperd, 'No school like home', the *Guardian*, **Tuesday 19 August 2008**; **downloadable at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/aug/19/schools.education>**
4. See <http://www.libertarian.co.uk/news/nr075.htm>

Photos in this article: *Home educating families: page 39, Thomas and his grandad, Peter; page 40, Liz and Rocco, New York; page 42, Hugo building a snowman; page 43, Mia and Tarka building on the beach.*

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