

Home Education: Visions into Practice?

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Abstract

Home Education has been at the centre of many socio political debates in Ireland. Such debates appear to have lost sight of the fact that under The Constitution the parent is the primary educator. The aim of this paper is to generate discussion and debate on the concept of home education as a learning environment for early years. Questions which come to the fore in considering a learning environment include *access* to such a forum and *assessment* thereafter of the quality of teaching and educational outcomes; social, emotional and psychological. It is the contention of the author that parents can feel unsupported and disempowered when educating their children outside of the system or the school model as we know it. Thus, access and assessment issues need to be addressed in the context of parents putting into practice their visions of home education. With increasing numbers of parents choosing home education in Ireland more inclusiveness needs to be attained. In view of the fact that “during the first few years of life children probably experience the richest learning environment they will ever encounter” (Thomas 1998: 21) models of collaboration and communication between social, educational, welfare systems and parents need to be established.

Aims and objectives

The aim of this paper is to highlight the relevance of home education as a valid forum for early years education. Home education is in fact a valuable forum in which to sow the seeds of life long learning and while the issues raised in this discussion are

targeted to the early years it is the contention of the author that home education per se is in itself a valid method of education for all age groups. The concept of home education will be defined and questions addressed regarding home education choices.

Home education defined

Monk (2002) defines the increase in the prevalence of home education as a “quiet revolution” (Monk 2002: 568). Revolution or not it is important however to define what we mean by the concept of home education in order for subsequent debates to ensue. Petrie (1999) states that home education is “where parents are committed to their children’s education and home-educating” (Petrie 1999 in Rothermel 2002:3). Petrie et al subsequently talk about home education “as the full-time education of children in and around the home by their parents or guardians or by tutor’s appointed by the parents or guardians” (1999:6). The term home education is often referred to in the literature as ‘elective home education’ but Arora (2006) in particular refers to this term in her discussions of home education for special needs children. Arora (2006) stresses further the value in elective home education for children with a variety of special educational and or social and psychological needs. While some argue that the formal school system may not be the appropriate forum for children with special needs, the fact remains that the school forum does not suit a great majority of parents and families who have chosen home education. Estimates show that figures of between 1500 and 2000 children are currently being home educated in Ireland. In the United Kingdom the figures for home educated children lie at approximately 150,000 children. (Rothermel 2002). The forum of home education, education otherwise, home schooling or the education of children outside the school system facilitates a vision that “independent of the teacher, each learner’s subjective experiences now

have a special and unique meaning. It is both the student's learning experience and her perceptions of those experiences that have educational value" (Boghossian 2006: 715). This statement has huge significance for parents in the midst of home education or those choosing to embark on the process. In addition, it has clear relevance for new models of self directed learning, independent learning and life long learning pedagogies. Vision therefore is the pertinent key word and one which will guide the discussion to highlight access to home education networks and practices. Before doing so however it is important to draw some reflections of vision from the literature. Webb (1990) stressed that "children learning at home experienced true involvement in directing their learning". Thomas (1998) referred to this as child centred learning where the children were directly involved in adjusting both the learning and the teaching to suit their needs. Research has also emerged in which home educating parents report learning in tandem with their children. Rothermel's study highlighted the importance of vision in home education where parents can fulfil "two separate 'professional' roles, as parents and educators" (Rothermel 2002:1). Fathers became more involved with their children because of flexible schedules indicative of educating at home (Page 1997 in Rothermel 2002) and visions of home education incorporated fresh ideas on teaching, guiding and scaffolding. More importantly the home education vision facilitated informal learning. Thomas highlights that a different pedagogy is at work in home educating families where over time "families adopted less formal learning patterns than those originally initiated" (Thomas 1998:53). On the basis of one hundred interviews conducted in Australia and the United Kingdom Thomas points to the prevalence of informal and natural learning evident in these families. It would appear that the 'structure' of formal school does not allow for natural and informal learning in the same way that home educating does.

Thomas further states that even in formal teaching in home contexts topics were explored in great depth which in turn encouraged and motivated the children to independent learning. It instilled responsibility in the children in guiding their own learning in conjunction with the supportive help or scaffolding of parents (Vygotsky 1978). Thomas utilised this research to document the vision of some educating families in Tasmania and UK where he found home educated children to be mature, independent and socially skilled. In his conclusions he noted that most home educators do not have professional training and highlighted the increasing number of parents and carers opting to educate their children at home. He reiterated further that they have brought about a major innovation in education. In conclusion Thomas comments on the decisions of parents to be “instrumentally and intimately involved in all aspects of their children’s education” as both generally enriching and fulfilling for both home educated children and parents (Thomas 1998: 125)

Why chose Home Education?

Analyses of the literature on home education points to many and varied reasons why parents choose this avenue. Research carried out by Webb (1990) highlighted a number of reasons why parents home educate including both a keen interest in alternative education processes and school based problems. In general however, the reasons home education is chosen as a valid and valuable route fall into philosophical, social, educational or religious categories. Analyses of these issues fall beyond the aims of this present paper but reference will be made however to general social movements which have prevailed over the last few decades. These include increased globalisation, increases in knowledge environments, greater demands for service industries and all of these are pitched against the new risk society outlined by Beck

(2000). Beck (2000) and Giddens (1991) point to increased disillusionment with the collective and the rise in individualised choices and individual trajectories including the rights of parents to choose their own educational initiatives for their children. Dissolution of the traditional family within Irish society has created a number of educational challenges and some families choose an education outside the recognised school system. Globalisation, with the emergence of ICT environments and the universal availability of knowledge has resulted in more independent and individualised vocational and learning careers undertaken in which home education fits perfectly. An increased multicultural society in Ireland means that some families will choose to educate their children outside Irish state schools. While the research to date has been pivotal in supporting communities of home educating families to persevere, it is my contention that there needs to be both an increase in focus on home education and a refocus on the research questions addressed thus far.

Why not choose Home Education?

The questions I would like to raise in this discussion are connected with the question why not choose home education?. The question why has so often been addressed that it is stifling the progress of recognition of home education as a valid and legitimate way of providing an education for children. In addressing the question why not, the only barriers I perceive are those from the social and education settings. The legalities of home education in Ireland are clearly outlined in Article 42 of Bunreacht na hEireann. It states that parents have a right to have their children educated in places other than recognised schools. Following the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 The National Education Welfare Board was established to deal with the rising problem of truancy and to interface with children receiving education outside the school model.

On the basis of this therefore any parent can choose to home educate their child or children. However, the question remains unanswered as to how to put a vision of home education into practice. How does that process move from a vision to the practice of educating children outside the school system and in the home context. The Quaid Family from the South East of Ireland could be described as a home schooling or home educating family. They have been the feature of many newspaper and television documentaries reporting on their choice of education and in particular their lifestyle. In one such interview with the Irish Independent Newspaper in 1999 Margaret stated “When Christopher was 18 months, I saw how much he was stimulated by everything around him. He was learning and progressing so quickly. I just looked at him and decided I can’t put him into school, I want him to develop more naturally”. In addition Margaret and Vaughan Quaid had a vision of how they wanted to educate their children. Margaret highlighted subsequently that she “wanted to be the first to see him read and write”. Christopher Quaid is the eldest of eight children. He chose to start his post primary education in 2005 and will sit his Junior Certificate in 2007. Two of his siblings began their post primary education in September 2006. The younger siblings in the Quaid family are all registered with the National Education Welfare Board as being educated outside the school system. The older siblings who started post primary education in September 2006 are using a model of flexi-schooling whereby they can pursue their post primary education within the school system and concurrently pursue their musical talents on the day/days they do not attend school. The relevance of vision is paramount in highlighting the practices of homes education undertaken by this particular family. In the process of conducted an internet search of the term vision I recovered meanings primarily from corporate or religious contexts however I am very drawn to the visions of people like

Martin Luther King, Maria Montessori and Steiner to mention just a few. The Quaid parents had a clear vision regarding the education of their children and began the process of putting that vision into practice by setting up the Home Education Network with a group of interested and committed parents who also had visions of home education for their families. The Quaid parents' visions required a massive investment of time, energy, money, resources, lobbying and clarification through the work of the HEN through to the establishment of the assessment procedures whereby home education is a legitimate choice open to all parents regardless of their visions. These parents are clearly "pioneering a more flexible form of education." according to Professor Roland Meighan, formerly Special Professor of Education at Nottingham University. There are a number of missing links however. Many parents have no knowledge of their right within the Constitution of Ireland to choose home education as a forum for their children. The missing links therefore include not only information but the communication of respect and dignity to parents who chose this vision of education for their families. It is important to stress families because home education is very much a life style choice impacting on all stages of the family life cycle. This is motivated from the vision of life long learning and the idea that every lived experience presents an opportunity to learn and develop as a person and not solely in terms of a learned behaviour or skill. Surpassing the vision and focussing on the practicalities of home education point to a lack of support and funding for communities of home educating parents and families. However, given that the situation for home educating families in Ireland has been an uphill struggle the recognition of the need to regulate home education practices is clearly coming to the fore in the form of registration and assessment under the banner of The Education (Welfare) Act of 2000 which came into effect in 2002.

What assessment procedures exist for home educating families?

NEWB The National Educational Welfare Board in Ireland was established under the terms of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. This Board has responsibility for children receiving education outside the Irish school system. The NEWB operates the Registration and Assessment processes in line with The Education (Welfare) Act 2000. In doing so the Board is involved in first line assessment of children educated at home. Presently less than 300 children are now registered yet there are up to 2000 children being home educated in Ireland. It was highlighted in the previous discussion that all parents can access home education per se., however, in order to be legitimate in their adoption of home education, parents are obliged to register each of their children on the afore mentioned register within the National Educational Welfare Board. It is conceivable that if more home educating families register then more collaboration and communication may be instigated which in turn will provide a further voice and vision for the future support and funding of home education practices. The establishment of the NEWB is very advantageous on a number of levels. The Board will give home educating parents and families a 'structure' with in which to frame their practices. The Board requires evidence of the work of children and this can be presented in many and varied forms and varieties of projects. It will assist in the assessment of the quality of practice and practices and in turn will stimulate communication and collaboration between systems and alternative educational forums in setting up access points to other supports systems. This is essential in view of the fact that home education does not just happen in the home.

Future research;

In conclusion therefore it must be highlighted that home educating parents in Ireland are at an advantage with the establishment of the National Educational Welfare Board. It is in its formative phase and only when all home educating families register will more inclusive communication and collaboration practices be able to ensue with the home education family networks in Ireland. Future research will need to address in a very systematic way the teaching methods and styles adopted in home education contexts with a view to further enhancement. In order to achieve the vision it is imperative that perceptions of home educating parents are accurately documented and supported in social, financial and aesthetic ways. The voices of children in the home education forum need to be heard, recorded and analysed. These voices are co-constructing their lived realities and their life long learning pathways. They have much to contribute to the practice of home education as a pedagogy and in doing so are realising and actualising their own visions for their futures.

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