

Dr H Pattison to R Halfon MP - 31 March 2021

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Subject: Education Select Committee Inquiry into Elective Home Education
To: <educom@parliament.uk>

Mr R Halfon MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

Dear Mr Halfon

I would like to respond to some of the points raised in the Select Committee Oral witness hearing of 23 March 2021, specifically those pertaining to literacy learning and the testing of basic skills for home educated children. I am a home education researcher who has been working in the field for over 20 years. I have researched literacy learning amongst home educated children and young people, including conducting an international study on the subject for my PhD thesis.

1. As a researcher, I am very concerned that turning home education into school at home through the imposition of blanket testing will curtail our understanding of educational possibilities and do an enormous disservice to families and children both now and in the future. I have conducted the largest scale research to date on learning to read in home education with an international sample of 400 children. The research shows that learning to read at home is highly successful and that the flexibility and variability within home education is one of its key strengths.
2. Plurality and diversity in education offers us a rich and promising field in which to further our collective understanding of how children learn and how we can help, encourage and support this. We know that home education is on the global increase and that the UK is part of a world wide trend. There is the opportunity now to make enlightened and supportive policy which could turn England into a world leader in terms of effective, flexible, individualised education in which all stake holders work together for the good of our children. It is so important that we do not squander this opportunity through ill-informed and prejudicial policy making.
3. 'Late' reading does not hold the same educational implications in home education as it does in school. It is important here to recognise that, on international comparison, children in English schools are expected to begin learning to read earlier, and sometimes much earlier, than children in other countries. Finland for example, scores very well on international comparison scales for literacy but children do not enter formal education before the age of seven. In other words, our ideas of 'late' reading would be considered normal in other contexts. There is no educational reason for forcing children to read before they are ready and no downside to waiting.
4. My research found that some home educated children learn very young and others much later, even as young teenagers. This variation means that age related blanket testing makes no sense for children not subject to national curriculum provision. Setting a benchmark for reading age / ability and applying it across the board to home educated children is unable to encompass the variety and variation in learning at home. It would not, and could not, take account of the rich personal journeys of literacy learning which my research revealed. Instead, any bench mark test would become an impediment to literacy learning and no doubt would lead to huge stress and a necessity to 'teach to the test' as a way of satisfying externally imposed and misguided criteria.
5. My research illustrates that learning to read at home is a highly individual journey which may take many forms and in which the potential learning trajectories are numerous. In accordance with social constructionist theories, literacy learning develops from individuals' interactions with the cultural and social sources around them. Thus literacy emerges from myriad contacts and stimuli in the lives of the home educated children, rather than from one single form

of didactic input. The data shows a wealth of rich examples of children becoming literate within the context of their own lives, interests and the possibilities and resources available to them.

6. Becoming literate at home encompasses far more variability and variety than the single track of age specific targets following the trajectory laid out by the National Curriculum. In particular, as with most home education, children have a much greater say in how they learn and the form which that learning takes. This in turn means that many home educated children do not set out to learn to read; instead they set out to do other things that interest them, like play on the computer, cook, have a pet, interact with friends, pursue a sport or hobby. They learn to read as an adjunct to this because reading forms a part of this wider interest. This is the embodiment of socio-cultural learning.

7. Children who learn to read at home 'late' by school standards make up the time very quickly. In my experience these children become competent readers within a couple of years, if not shorter time periods. Many 'late' readers actually start reading at levels normally considered way beyond beginner; for example, with novels such as the Harry Potter series. This underlines the point made above, that there is no advantage in forcing literacy learning but rather advantage in allowing children to follow their own timescales.

8. Further to the point above, home education does not rely on literacy as its teaching medium in the way that school does and, therefore, 'late' reading does not hold the same educational implications. At home, education can be pursued through the verbal, the visual and the hands on in ways which are precluded by the high pupil: teacher ratios of school. Children may be learning at high levels across a variety of subjects and through a range of means even if they are not independent readers. This allows children to develop at their own pace and through their own interests. I do not think we can overestimate the personal development opportunities this allows in terms of confidence, self-direction, resilience and mental well-being. I know that it was pointed out to the committee that The Children Society Report has highlighted the unhappiness of English children. We cannot ignore the stress of schooling if we are to take this report seriously and there are important lessons to learn here from alternative educational practices.

9. It is vitally important to recognise the safety net which home education can provide for children who are struggling in school. My research came across some remarkable examples of what home education can achieve. In one striking example I met a family in which the daughter was withdrawn from school aged 8, totally unable to read, to the point of not being able to recognise her own name. She was completely traumatised by her school experience. Her parents were told that she was in the bottom 3% of readers in the country and that she had significant special educational needs. At home, her mother continued to further her education but her mental state meant that she could not handle any direct reading tuition. This girl began to read aged 14. She went on to college and to read novels for pleasure.

This is a remarkable history and one which, sadly, is almost unheard of in mainstream schooling. We need to understand that, in some situations, home education offers opportunities beyond that which can be achieved in school. We need to ensure that any further policy changes protect both these children and the possibilities that alternative forms of education offer them. Ideally we need to be learning from these examples in order to help all children, whether in school or not.

10. I would of course, be more than happy to discuss my research and disseminate publications to interested parties.

Yours sincerely

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