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Autonomous Non-conformism: Home Education in the United Kingdom

In America, the term “British” often calls to mind a stiff, formal culture where education consists of boarding schools and unforgiving schoolmasters. However, British education has undergone major changes over the past decade, and one area of interest is the increasing number of families who choose to home educate their children rather than send them to public schools.

The royal family and other members of the British elite have for centuries been schooled at home, but the home education movement among the general population in the UK began to grow during the 1970s and 1980s (Woods, 2007). This movement coincided with the growth of the homeschooling movement in the United States, and despite the fact that the British movement has to date been smaller proportionally than the American one, it is still significant. There were an estimated 50,000 home educated children in the UK in 2005 (Woods, 2005), and recent estimates indicate that home educated children comprise between 1 and 1.5% of all children of appropriate age (Woods, 2007). However, some home educators believe that these estimates are inflated since polls of local authorities have revealed a significant lack of awareness regarding home education. Some home educators still feel like a “novelty” among their non-home educating friends (Berry, Mar 21).

Home education has very strong support in British law. The Education Act of 1996 states that “The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable (a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and (b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise” (“Education Act 1996”). This leads to a very hands-off official policy for home education: parents are not required to obtain permission to home

educate, and unless they are withdrawing their child from a public school, it is usually not necessary to inform the LEA (local education authority) of their intent. Parents are not required to have teaching degrees nor do they have to follow the nationally-endorsed curriculum or keep a fixed schedule (“FAQ”) (“School Is Not Compulsory”) (“A Summary”). Home educators in the UK have had varying experiences with the local education authorities. Some LEAs have a good reputation among home educators for their cooperation and lack of interference (Traynor, Mar 17), while other LEAs have a reputation of distrust and antipathy towards home educators (Berry, Mar 23).

Although some families home educate because of bad experiences at public school (Berry, Mar 21) (Traynor, Mar 19), many also home educate as a part of an alternative lifestyle of autonomous non-conformism (Traynor, Mar 17). By involving their children in decisions about their education and lifestyle, parents try to achieve mutually agreeable solutions. This lifestyle is sometimes referred to as “taking children seriously” (Traynor, Mar 19) and proposes that removing the coercion of compulsory education would result in children growing up to be “more educated, more interested and more intelligent” (Berry, Mar 23). This belief resembles the educational philosophies of American authors John Taylor Gatto and John Holt, who have published books regarding the modern homeschooling and “unschooling” movements (Berry, Mar 23).

One interesting phenomenon among home educating families in the UK involves the many organized camping events. One such event is called “HES FES” (Home Educators Seaside Festival). It takes place each year at Mersea Island in Essex and claims to be “the world's biggest gathering of home educating families” (“HESFES”). The event generally lasts for about a week during the summer and features many activities such as woodworking, science experiments, singing, dancing, cooking and socialization (Traynor, Mar 19). These camps seem to be something of an anomaly in the United Kingdom, since home educators in nearby Ireland seem unaware of the practice (Benitez). Apart from these camps, home educators also tend to find other similarly-minded families in an area to meet

occasionally in small groups for activities and social contact (Berry, Mar 21).

It is possible for home educated children to earn the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and attend a university. Some home educators believe that their alternative educational philosophy results in university students who are more interested in their field of study, since they were not typecast during their early school years and thus have the freedom to pursue a field that they are truly intrigued by rather than remaining stuck in an area simply because they previously earned good test scores in that subject (Berry, Mar 21).

In conclusion, home education in the United Kingdom is certainly allowed by British law and seems to be primarily associated with non-conformist lifestyles. From the “taking children seriously” philosophy to the practice of home educator's camps like HESFES, the home education community seems to be motivated primarily by the desire to pursue alternative lifestyles. For these people, home education is simply a logical extension of this kind of lifestyle, and although their numbers are still relatively small, they are finding fulfillment in their methods. It remains to be seen whether home education will gain a significant foothold in mainstream British society.

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