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Home Education “Across the Pond”

The home education movement began its present growth in both the United Kingdom and the United States during the 1970s. Today, the percentage of children that are educated at home is greater in the US (3%) than in the UK (1.5%), but both groups are growing quickly (Woods). There are certainly many similarities between the two groups of home educators, such as a disdain for government regulation and a desire to provide the best possible education for their children. However, a closer examination reveals that their cultures are different in a few very significant ways. There are three major differences between the two groups: terminology, method and motivation.

The first, most obvious difference between home education in the UK and home education in the US is that their practitioners use different terms to describe themselves. American home educators have largely adopted the use of the term “home schooling” (sometimes removing the space to make it a single word: “homeschooling”), but British home educators prefer “home education.” This divergence may not seem like a significant difference, but it reflects a subtle shift in emphasis and ideology. American home schoolers largely view themselves as an alternative to public schools—an organized, competitive institution with spokespersons, rules and rigorous standards. British home educators, however, tend to dismiss the idea of rigorous “schooling” as unnecessary, with the only truly important goal being that their children gain an “education.” This concept is supported by British law regarding nation-wide education (Education Act 1996).

This difference in nomenclature helps to explain another major difference between UK home education and American homeschooling: their methods. While there are certainly exceptions, many home

schoolers in the US follow the public school system very closely, convening on the same seasonal schedule and mimicking the “grade” structure. They use curricula that are varied but relatively standardized and many of their children take standardized tests on a yearly basis (Duffy 427-429). In many ways, these behaviors reflect their goal of providing a superior alternative to the public school system.

UK home educators, on the other hand, seem to prefer a much less structured approach. Only 14% use the standard curriculum (Scott), and many do not even keep a regular schedule, neither of which are required by British law (“School Is Not Compulsory”). Children are encouraged to explore and pursue their curiosities. The goal is to cause learning to become a joy, not a chore, with activities that extend across fields and last for as long as interest is maintained, and not simply until the next bell rings (Scott). Obviously, each family will have a unique blend of emphasis and methods, but the culture is largely one of autonomous non-conformism. This philosophy has become known by the name “unschooling,” and has been promoted by educators such as John Holt and John Taylor Gatto. These thinkers insist that traditional, classroom-based schooling is largely ineffective in educating children, and they propose a more diverse experience including independent study, community service, and field curriculum (Gatto 18-19). British parents are finding that, although it may seem counter-intuitive, giving their children fewer restrictions eventually results in greater self-motivation, with the student working harder to succeed autonomously (Berry, Mar 23) (Scott).

Finally, the largest difference between home educators in the UK and home schoolers in the US is motivation. UK home educators generally choose to remove their children from public schools for two reasons: 1) they remember traumatic experiences from their own childhood (usually involving bullying) and do not wish their children to have the same experiences (Traynor, Mar 19) (Scott), and 2) they do not want their children exposed to the religious nature of the public schools (Reilly). Many parents felt that the public school system was “draining” their children and stifling their creativity (Rainsford-Ryan).

Although the former reason is shared by home schoolers in the United States, the latter reason is the exact opposite of why many Americans home school. A partial explanation for this discrepancy can be found in the fact that the British public school system is highly religious by tradition, but the American system is intentionally secular. Thus, many religious Americans remove their children from school in order to remove them from secular influences that are perceived to be harmful, and to provide a more protective, value-based culture for them until they are older. Many of these children are enrolled in private religious schools (which are largely non-existent in the UK), but the rest are home schooled. Survey results show that 72% of home schooling parents cite “religious or moral instruction” as a reason they chose to home school, and nearly 30% cite it as the most important reason. In addition, 36% of home schoolers report using curriculum from a religious organization (“Homeschooling”). This percentage is in addition to the numerous home schoolers who use commercial curricula that heavily incorporate Christian themes, such as A Beka, Alpha Omega, and Bob Jones University Press (Duffy 139-140).

By its nature, home education attracts independent, motivated parents—these kinds of people are found in both the United Kingdom and the United States. However, differences in self-description, motivation and structure result in subtly different cultures. Home schoolers in America tend to be “normal” families who copy many of the facets of public schools and attempt to create a more effective blend of education. Home educators in Britain take a more autonomous approach, largely abandoning the concept of formal education altogether and opting for a more organic view of education in which they attempt to induct their children into lifestyle of learning. Obviously, there are exceptions to these rules in both groups, but these glimpses seem to be a fair characterization of the two cultures. It remains to be seen whether one approach will be more effective in the long term, whether they will both remain viable options, or whether they will both eventually be replaced by some radically novel type of home education. The developments over the coming decades will be exciting to watch.

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