

Self-directed learning

I have undertaken extensive research into alternative forms of learning with a focus on “unschooling.”

The term “unschooling” is used in order to differentiate between it from home schooling which is based on a set curriculum, structured teaching and age-related assessment. Unschooling is also known variously as self directed, autonomous, natural or informal learning. Government guidelines in England recognise unschooling as a legitimate form of education.

Self directed learning can be understood as a continuation and extension of the way that all children learn before reaching school age. My research and that of others, documents clearly how children learn autonomously following what I have called their informal curriculum in the context of home, family and the wider community.

For anyone new to self-directed learning it may be difficult to understand how children can acquire a well rounded education without any obvious structure or direct teaching. However, it has become a well recognised approach in the home educating community throughout the world.

In self-directed learning children acquire knowledge and understanding of the world through self-initiated activities and interests and in response to parental suggestions. As is the case with preschool children, parents are obviously aware of the skills that children need to acquire and present opportunities for such learning. The difference is that they rarely insist and children learn at their own pace, following their interests and often on a “need to know” basis.

A consequence of this is that assessment of progress based on tests standardised on school children is inappropriate. This includes learning to read. Many children learn to read with little or no direct teaching acquiring the skill between 3/4 years of age and as “late” as 10 years. Those who were “late” were very quickly reading on a par with their school peers and appear not to experience the cumulative deficit experienced by children in school if they are not reading by the expected age of 7. In fact there is no scientific justification for this milestone. It is there simply because of tradition and because, in school, the curriculum from the age of 7 requires children to be able to read.

I use reading by way of example. The same applies across the curriculum as my research and increasingly that of others, clearly demonstrates.

This is not to challenge school methods. It is simply to say that while established traditions, practices and pedagogies in schools may be “best practice” in school, it does not follow that they are universally applicable.

Unschooling children, by definition will not have followed the school curriculum. Any tests that are standardised on and/or related to what is taught in school will therefore have little validity.

School students are regularly assessed and progress can be related to age norms. This is understandably problematic for mainstream educators when faced with gauging progress of children who are unschooled mainly because each child has a unique, very different educational experience. It is not until they have undertaken studies for qualifications or entered the workforce that the success of their unschooling can be measured. In my experience the best way to find out how children are progressing in an understanding of the world is to talk with them and with their parents.

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