

School's out...

Naomi Fisher considers the arguments for self-directed education.

The literature on not attending school is full of negative outcomes; Jason Schoeneberger's 2012 review suggests that dropping out of school is associated with incarceration, unemployment, lower lifetime earnings, even premature death. The UK government is unequivocal on their website, stating 'Going to school regularly is important for your child's future'. Yet school is not the only way to get an education...

In my early career as a clinical psychologist, I worked with several young people who had stopped attending school. I understood this as anxiety-driven school refusal. I devised graded-exposure programmes, and wrote letters making it clear that in my view a successful outcome would be a return to school. It seemed the reasonable thing to do. One girl, Nina, didn't want to go back. When I made my perspective clear, she and her family disengaged... they stopped coming.

As I continued to work with children in different contexts, I found myself feeling more uncomfortable with my focus. For some of them school was a positive place, and the problem was indeed anxiety. But for some, school was a painful experience, where they felt like they weren't learning and weren't able to be themselves. One boy showed his mum a picture of a caged animal and said 'That's how I feel at school'. I felt ill at ease with locating this problem in the child, and assuming that the school itself was fine. What alternative environments were possible? How might they impact the child psychologically?

An outdated system?

School is a relatively recent invention in human history, having become compulsory in the UK in 1893. As Alison Gopnik, professor of psychology and philosophy at the University of California, says in her 2016 book *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, mass schooling was established as a reaction to the rise of industrialisation in 19th century Europe – a very specific set of circumstances. A particular approach was therefore taken, one which involved an expert teacher instructing a group of children in the skills they would need in their future life as workers. The teachers were the most active people in the class, and they controlled what everyone learnt.

This was at a time when psychology as a discipline hardly existed. We now know a lot more about learning than we did in the 19th century. Recent theories of learning, including Gopnik's own, focus on the interaction between a child and their environment. Gopnik argues that children behave like scientists, creating hypotheses and testing them out. Her studies





show how even very young children are making predictions about the world, and then changing their behaviour accordingly. Behavioural genetics studies back this up – it seems that the effect that the environment has on a child is always mediated by their genes. Children are not passive recipients of the world around them: they are active agents.

Of course, any teacher knows this. You can teach the same lesson to 30 children and they will all learn different things. In traditional schooling, this is a problem.

Gopnik argues that this variability is a human strength, and we should be nurturing it. She doesn't think school is unnecessary, but she does say that it's not as important as many of us think. She thinks other forms of social learning are 'more sophisticated, and more fundamental'.

Others have gone further. As far back as 1921, A.S. Neill started Summerhill, the school where lessons are optional. Ivan Illich, John Taylor Gatto and John Holt

have argued that children do not need to be forced to learn. Maria Montessori designed her system of education over a hundred years ago. She wanted to enable children to develop their full potential, rather than learning to pass tests. There is a growing field of evidence showing that Montessori schools are highly effective, even when success is defined by passing a test (e.g. Lillard, 2018). In Montessori schools, children are active agents in their learning, using self-directed activities and play guided by their teacher.

However, despite evidence that more child-centred alternatives can work, our school system seems to be becoming more formal and rigid, with the introduction of more standardised high stakes tests, particularly in primary schools.

In this context, I set out to find out more about education where children are active agents. Perhaps the most radical type of all is self-directed education, where the children are not made to follow any curriculum at all, unless they want to. I interviewed

psychologists researching learning in home educated children, and others focusing on children in self-directed schools (which exist across Europe, Israel, and the USA).

The key thing which linked the work of these researchers is that the children they studied have *choice* about what they learn. Self-directed education doesn't rule out any particular educational approach. What it rules out is any use of coercion. If a child wants to stop, they can stop.

Informal education

Alan Thomas (UCL Institute of Education) hadn't planned to look at learning outside school. Whilst teaching developmental psychology at Charles Darwin University in Australia, he became intrigued by the learning which went on in one-to-one interactions between the child and their teacher, something which was hard to study at school because it is comparatively rare. He turned to parents who home educate their children.

Before starting out, Thomas was invited to spend a week living with a home educating family. He expected to see the families sitting down with their children, in a replica of school, but at home. But he quickly realised that many of the children were not actually being formally taught at all. He then embarked on a study of approaches used by 100 home educating families in Australia and the UK. He told me enthusiastically about the experience.

'It's the most fascinating work I've ever done... Lots of parents would start off quite formally because they'd taken their children out of school and that

was the only approach they knew. Two factors impelled them toward informal, self-directed learning. Formal one-to-one learning turned out to be intensive and soon became restricted to mornings, which meant that children had a lot of free time during which they would follow their own interests. Many children also resisted direct teaching – when it's one-to-one and a child is simply not listening and whose eyes glaze over, there is no point in continuing.'

Thomas tells me that what was truly groundbreaking was that parents started to question mainstream education. 'They were like scientists, exploring alternatives, often abandoning all the structure and age-related yardsticks of school. And it didn't matter, the children seemed to come out of it very well anyway, well prepared to enter formal education later on.'

Thomas was so intrigued by what he saw that he went on to look in depth at informal home education. With Harriet Pattison, a home educating parent, they recruited and interviewed 26 families. 'We came up with the idea of the informal curriculum if you like, which is the world around you. And you just pick it up, very much as an extension of the way all children learn in the early years. I've reflected since then and I sometimes wonder if there's more teaching in informal education than there is in formal education, but it's more at the direction of the child. To an onlooker it might seem to have no structure whatsoever, just snippets and fleeting moments of learning. But to the child it all makes sense and somehow all the bits and pieces coalesce. It's as if each child has their own theory of learning.'

Pattison is now a lecturer in early childhood studies at Liverpool Hope University. She explained to me how she became particularly interested in how children at home learnt to read. For her PhD, she surveyed 311 families, covering 400 children. She described the responses as like opening the floodgates. Parents wrote her pages about the process of their children learning to read – and what they wrote was surprising.

Outside school, it didn't seem to matter if a child didn't learn to read until much later than age seven. Their education wasn't mainly accessed through the printed word, unlike at school. Children learnt to read between the age of 18 months and 16, with ages varying wildly even within the same family. Some parents followed reading schemes, others didn't. Some provided high literacy environments with activities, others didn't. The children learnt to read regardless. Some children went on to higher education and became proficient readers after only learning to read as teenagers. 'The main finding', Pattison tells me, 'was that there were no hard and fast rules about learning to read. There is no essential core... There is no one thing, or two things, or three things, that have to happen for reading to be accomplished. It's an incredibly diverse, plastic kind of process.'

Thomas and Pattison's research throws up some intriguing questions – what if many of the tenets we take as given about education, are actually only true about education in school? And what if schooling is only one way to become educated?

Schools where kids just goof around?

Over the other side of the Atlantic, Peter Gray, research professor in psychology at Boston College, was having his own epiphany. He was a successful product of the traditional school system himself, and was carrying out research on maternal behaviour in rats when things got difficult at home. His nine-year-old son Scott was refusing to cooperate with school. Things were deteriorating, and an alternative needed.

They found Sudbury Valley School (SVS), in Framlingham, Massachusetts. SVS bears little relation to what most of us imagine when we hear the word

Key sources

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Democratic education in the UK:
<http://eastkentsudburyschool.org.uk/>
<http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/>
<https://www.sands-school.co.uk/>

'school'. Children choose what they do all day long, and children and staff run the school together by democratic meeting. This means that at various times children will be playing outside, playing computer games, chatting, drawing, making music, constructing things with cardboard boxes, making mud pies, writing letters, watching TV. Choice really does mean choice.

Gray explained that his concern about his son's future prospects led him to carry out a study on the graduates. 'And that convinced me that I didn't have to worry, that they were doing fine out there in the world. But it also intrigued me, because here they are, they're not doing much that looks like school, if anything that looks like school, and yet they are going on to live successful lives, they are going on to higher education if they choose to do so. How is it that they are becoming educated? What's actually happening with them? It looks like they are just playing and goofing around and doing what you would expect kids to do, and yet they are becoming educated.'

This is now history – Scott graduated from SVS in 1987 and went onto Boston College where he graduated in 1991. He wrote about his experiences transitioning from a school with no lessons to university in an article in the *Washington Post* in 1993: 'Many assume that it's difficult to survive the structured environment of college after SVS, but I found the opposite. Most freshmen are accustomed to being told what to do and when, but I was used to directing myself. While other students had to learn how to discover answers on their own, I had never known any other way. People sometimes critique SVS as an "unstructured" school – but without formal discipline, people learn to discipline themselves. I spent eight years playing games, thinking thoughts, making things and interacting with people. Doing things, rather than being told how to do them.'

These findings were replicated later on in another population – the informally educated home educators who also interested Thomas and Pattison. Gray and Gina Riley, an educational psychologist and clinical professor of adolescent special education at Hunter College, surveyed 75 young adults who were 'unschooled' (informally educated) as children and teenagers. Adults in their sample reported being able to go onto higher education, largely expressed satisfaction with their education and the great majority were financially independent. There were a few who felt let down by their education, but this is also the case in schooled populations.

What is particularly interesting about this sample was that the majority of their sample could also have been termed 'drop outs' – they had attended some school. This is the group who Schoeneberger describes as experiencing the 'frustration and incompetence



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associated with disengagement and disinterest in school'. But that wasn't what Gray and Riley found. The young people in their study saw themselves as informally educated – dropping in to alternative education outside school, rather than as drop outs from education altogether. Perhaps this difference in perspective is what matters.

Gray summarised his findings for me. 'Almost everybody believes that somehow going through this conventional graded curriculum that we call schooling is essential for our world and if you don't do it you'll be homeless or you'll never get a decent job. And this is reinforced because of course there are people who drop out from school who don't do well in the world. But what if you make the deliberate decision not to go to school, and you are in an environment in which you can educate yourself and you are in a position to take charge of your own education? That's a very different situation from seeing yourself as a drop out, and a loser, and all that.'

As with Thomas and Pattison, Riley and Gray's work is with self-selecting samples. They are not claiming that all children educated outside school will be successful, any more than all children educated at school are successful. What is significant about their research is that it shows that conventional schooling is not essential for later success, even attending university or going onto professional careers. It's possible that for some children, this might mean that they can succeed when otherwise they would have failed.

But how could it work?

If we accept that children can be educated outside of the school system, often with no structure that we would recognise as educational, how does that actually happen? What is happening in the 'goofing around'?

Former secondary school teacher and current teacher trainer, Kevin Currie-Knight, of East Carolina University's College of Education, is fascinated by the nitty-gritty of how children become educated. He told me how when he was planning for one of his classes, he stumbled across research which challenged his assumptions about school and learning.

'A good quantity of students experience school as a series of hoops you have to jump through', Currie-Knight explained. 'The learning is kind of secondary. The jumping through hoops is the priority: get the grade, get the credentials, the learning is just what you have to do to do that. Of course, the problem is that if learning is the goal, that's not a great way to do it.'

As Currie-Knight thought more about this, he became interested in a domain where learning is quite different to school but no less complex – video games. For educators, video games are an intriguing puzzle. 'What we noticed is that video game manufacturers

seem to have cracked the code that educators have been trying to crack for hundreds of years – how do you get kids to stay so motivated to learn this thing on which they will repeatedly and voluntarily have failure after failure?’

Part of the answer, of course, is that children choose to play video games. When they are bored, they stop. This led Currie-Knight to reflect on the role of autonomy and interest in learning, and with that in mind he decided to experiment, putting self-directed learning at the heart of his courses for would-be teachers. ‘[I told them] the only parameter for this project is to demonstrate to me somehow that you have got the main points of this unit, that’s it. And [their projects] just got better. I wasn’t expecting that... I thought at some point it would go really badly. I imagined that students would low ball their projects, just pick whatever the easiest thing is. What I found was almost the opposite... my experience was they turned in projects that were bigger and longer.’

So the more autonomy Currie-Knight gave his teachers, the more effort they put in. Gina Riley, also a trainer of teachers, introduced me to a possible explanation – Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (SDT). Edward Deci, as a doctoral research student in 1969, became intrigued by the question of what happens to people’s curiosity and vitality over time. His studies indicated that external motivators could damage intrinsic motivation – when a child was rewarded for doing a task they enjoyed, they were less likely to continue with it when the rewards stopped than if they had never been rewarded in the first place. And so the relative lack of external motivators for the home educated might preserve their intrinsic motivation, meaning that they are able to learn dynamically and flexibly from the world around them. When they want to study academic subjects, they bring this attitude with them.

Riley explained to me how a key part of SDT suggests how to facilitate intrinsic motivation. ‘You can’t force intrinsic motivation, you can only facilitate it, and the way you can do that according to cognitive self-evaluation theory is by using the realms of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.’

This is what Currie-Knight was doing with his students – increasing their autonomy. Same with the home educators that Thomas and Pattison studied – when they resisted teaching, their parents listened and responded to that, increasing their autonomy over their environment.

There’s an obvious drawback to this theory as regards education: we can’t decide what someone else is intrinsically motivated to do. We can only, according to SDT, facilitate the process. What if a child just doesn’t want to learn to read, or do maths? What then?

Play, curiosity and sociability

This isn’t something that worries Peter Gray. He is confident that children can be trusted to learn the

skills they need in any given environment, just as they have done throughout human existence. ‘I think they [children] are biologically predisposed to look around and ask, what is that people do in this culture? What is it that everybody does? What is it that I’m going to have to learn? They don’t consciously think of it that way, but at some gut level they are registering that and they are playing at all the kinds of skills that are important for them to develop.’

Gray’s theory proposes three drives which he suggests are innate to young humans: curiosity, play and sociability. ‘Curiosity and play are complementary means of educating yourself. Curiosity is how you learn answers to the questions that you have about the world, and play is how you develop skills. Play is often repetitive because of the value of repetition in skill development. Play is always at the cutting edge of your ability, it becomes boring if it’s too easy, so you’re always playing at increasingly advanced levels, whether it’s physical skills, intellectual skills, emotional skills, or social skills.’

When you add sociability to that, it acts as a multiplier. Each child doesn’t have to make each new discovery for themselves, because they learn by watching and listening to others. ‘This is what makes culture possible, the accumulation of culture. Every generation is paying attention to what the previous generation is doing... They also naturally share knowledge with their friends, so one child’s discovery becomes the discovery of the whole cohort.’

Sugata Mitra provides a detailed breakdown of this process. He and his colleagues sunk a computer into a wall near their office in New Delhi, India – and children found it. His writings illustrate how local children learnt how to use the computer through a process of exploration, observation and communicating their discoveries to each other. The process occurred equally well regardless of the children’s socioeconomic status, literacy level or educational background.

In the UK, Mitra has pioneered the use of ‘Self-organising Learning Environments’ in schools, hubs where five or six children share a computer and are given questions to answer by their teacher, collaboratively. The children are allowed to move around, talk to each other and share information. He has found that in this context primary school children were able to answer GCSE level questions, and retain the information when tested two months later.

Of course, without the computer being sunk into that wall by an adult, the children would not have learnt to use it. Children, whilst being active agents, can only learn what is available to them. None of this research argues that children can become educated without adults. It simply proposes a different role for adults in education. Rather than focusing on transmitting information and skills (and then trying to motivate children to learn them), adults focus on creating an interesting age-appropriate environment for the child to explore. The challenge, then, is ours.



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