

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Interview with Peter Humphreys, 7 June 2013

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Peter Humphreys is Chair, trustee and a director of the Centre for Personalised Education – Personalised Education Now (CPE-PEN). Peter spent 25 years as a primary teacher, 10 of those as Head teacher. Since leaving teaching he has worked as an educational consultant covering roles in the local authority advisory service, BECTA (the government agency promoting ICT) and Futurelab. He currently works for Birmingham City University in teacher education. Peter researches, edits, writes and publishes in the CPE-PEN journal, CPE-PEN website and blog. Peter is passionate about learning and very clear about the distinction between schooling and an education. He actually loathed much of his own schooling. Whilst achieving what might be termed satisfactorily on “normative schooling indicators,” he felt over-schooled and ill-educated and that much time had been wasted in oppressive and rigid learning situations. Ironically, he determined to be teacher and to try not to replicate the experiences for others he had himself. As a result he has always had a “mainstream” and an “alternative” career and outlook. Being open to ideas from any source and hugely influenced by his

mentor Dr Roland Meighan and the work of radical and alternative educators across the globe, has led to a long association and interest with alternative groups and organisations and his current roles with the Centre for Personalised Education.

Peter believes that we are still failing to grasp what real educational personalisation entails. Hence the interest in flexi-schooling, elaborated by Roland Meighan in 1988. Ultimately, learning, he says, has to be largely self-determined and directed, with the support of others. Co-created learning experiences and learning journeys, invitational teaching and assessment need to be the norm rather than the exception. He suggests flexischooling as a model can be transformative and begin to challenge the rigid assumptions of an imposed, age-staged proscribed curriculum. It can help the schooling system examine itself and perhaps recycle how it operates so that it responds more to the needs and aspirations of the learner and not the other way round.

The following are answers to the questions posed by myself to Peter Humphreys about flexischooling in an interview.

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HP: What is flexischooling and how does it work?

PH: Flexischooling as it pertains to schooling in England, (it is different in Scotland, North America and elsewhere) is an individual contractual arrangement between a family, a learner and a school. It is a part-time arrangement if you like, where part of the time is spent home-based, and part of the time is spent in a school setting. Flexischooling is an agreement negotiated by families, head teachers and governors providing benefits for pupils, families, schools, communities and, if they care to investigate, government. It offers something quite unique and special of which this country can and should be, really proud. It is of interest to families whose children do not get on in schools for various reasons and those who perhaps home educate but would like to access some parts of the school work and life, or cannot practically home educate full-time.

The school takes responsibility for the learning of the child both within the school setting and technically in the home in that they have to ensure that approved education is going on. What that education looks like can vary enormously across the whole continuum of what is seen in elective home education but it has to be something which, for registration and funding purposes, the school has agreed to. So it could occur with an autonomous home educator who comes to the school, and says ‘this is what we do at home but we would also like a slice of schooling – can we negotiate?’ Other flexischoolers might operate a more formal ‘school at home’ approach. So it is an arrangement, in England, of education taking place

partly in school and partly not and that arrangement is distinctive in every case.

In Scotland there is a much simpler and more effective arrangement and it’s probably what we want to work towards where it is part-time home education, part-time school. The responsibilities are crystal clear. It’s simple, clean, it’s easier to manage and easier to account for in terms of registration and funding and things like that.

HP: What is the official position on flexischooling?

PH: Flexischooling is allowed for in law—being briefly mentioned in the Elective Home Education Guidelines 2007—but the guidelines which account for it are actually unclear. This makes it difficult for schools and local authorities who don’t know about it. It’s not hard to see how we have arrived at the current position: the law has allowed for flexischooling yet there has been no active promotion of it. It appears that successive governments have been unaware of the extent of flexischooling and not felt the need to provide parents, local authorities or schools with sufficient information or guidance. Legally, the local authority has nothing to do with flexischooling. They don’t collect data, they cannot say no to it. At best they can help schools by signposting advice, of which there is very little. Typically, they do a very bad job because they normally get their facts wrong or prefer not to support it positively. Undoubtedly, this is one of the reasons why the take-up for flexischooling is slower than we might expect, though in all honesty we don’t know, because we haven’t got the data.

Sadly, local authority education departments tend to be focused on attendance and imagined safeguarding issues at the expense of exploring tangible educational outcomes. This in turn has led to a less sympathetic approach toward flexischooling and other alternatives to traditional schooling. Many have failed to meet their obligations under the Elective Home Education Guidelines 2007 section 5.6 to “[M]ake sure that head teachers are made familiar with flexischooling and how it may work in practice.” In addition, the reputation of flexischooling is distorted with unhelpful, stereotypes, inaccuracies and disinformation. It’s unlikely that you would find it mentioned in university-based initial teacher education or school-based teacher training pathways. There is clearly a challenge here, and we’d argue that more needs to be done to raise understanding about flexischooling and to address the information vacuum.

So the way it normally proceeds is that a family will find out about flexischooling or in some cases progress to the concept themselves. They will then go around schools to see if anyone is prepared to negotiate. Nine times out of ten the head will respond “What is flexi-schooling?” They might say “No” from the outset... which is their right. Or they might say, “We need to find out more” and seek local authority guidance. In such a case the local authority might have a positive spin on it or they might not. Probably seven out of ten would have a negative spin and would put them off out of pure ignorance—not for any educational reason. But those who are persistent enough might go the extra mile and find an organisation like the Centre for Personalised Education or some of the information that is out there about

flexischooling and realise that it does have potential and can work extremely successfully. Thereafter it is a negotiation between the parent, child, and the school. The only people who need to agree are the Head and the governors.

HP: How much do we know about flexischooling?

PH: There is no basic research on flexischooling in the UK other than Roland Meighan’s (1988) book *Flexischooling. Education for Tomorrow, Starting Yesterday* and The CfBT Trust did publish a guidance report on new models for organising education: *Flexischooling—How One School Does It Well* in 2011. We occasionally hear that masters and doctoral students give it some focus but nothing significant is known. The Centre for Personalised Education has also produced a *Flexischooling Guidance* manual and a briefing document *Flexischooling: A Case for Celebration and Further Innovation*, in 2013. There may be some research in North America where there has been a longer history of flexischooling under the guise of independent study programmes; certainly into the pedagogical approaches. By that I mean kids who decide to take on their learning in a more self-managed way, under licence if you like from schools, or home educating families who can access elements of schooling as a matter of right in some states. In North America it is actually pretty much a non-subject; particularly in those areas where you have huge geographical distances between schools. For them it’s seen as quite natural. They simply see that they are supporting the home educating community

and of those people, some might want a portion of school as well.

In England, [regarding attendance in schools for flexischooling] at the moment, the data is just not there. (I'm not certain what the situation is in Scotland or elsewhere in the UK). There is no way of collecting it and until the government does actually have a registration code for flexischooling we won't have that data; it's all going to be guess work. Logic would say that you define a flexischooling code in the register so that data could be collected nationally and locally and we would know the extent of flexischooling. What we have at the moment from our own research is that there is somewhere between 1000 and 3000 children across the country who are flexischooled but this is based on Freedom of Information requests of local authorities who don't have much information themselves. So, bar asking every school in the country, it is an impossibility at the moment. And even if we did that, some schools would be reluctant to flag it up. Flexischooling parents themselves are often reluctant to talk because they fear that officialdom might find out and stop it. There is a lot of tension and uncertainty while there is such a lack of clarity.

All we can say is that it has probably never had so much press interest and focus. You couldn't categorically say it is on the rise but, we suspect it is. Our own Facebook groups for instance, (we have two), have over 500 members and they grow at the rate of 1 or 2 a day at the moment. People who have found them have done so through word of mouth. When we did do Freedom of Information requests around local authorities some of them surprised us when they knew about

odd examples of flexischooling but generally the information base is poor. For instance we don't know about the numbers of children with SEN who are involved in flexischooling. One would suspect that it is probably a similar percentage to those in the elective home education population but we don't really know.

Annually for the last decade along with the quite positive broadsheet editorial excursions into home education there are usually one or two pieces on flexischooling. They're very predictable, but never going further than saying "This sounds like a sweet idea," never pushing pedagogy, never pushing the influence that it could have on the system, never pushing any ideas about how we could take this further. And on the negative side these articles probably unintentionally reinforce "middle class, kitchen table" stereotyping which is often laid on home education as well. They are always positive but they don't go anywhere and they never follow up. It's probably the same article every year with a different family!

Discussions of flexischooling can often be taken up with tortuous rehearsal of procedural issues around registration, funding and child protection. I think the important thing is not to get bogged down in the technicalities, the bureaucratic and the administrative issues but to focus on the principles and the values and the important things which flexischooling can offer young people and learning. This is a win-win situation, or, it could be, if those in officialdom were to open their eyes and to look at the happy parents and families and achieving kids who otherwise might be failing. By looking at the positive outcomes some mainstream educators might just be persuaded to become a little

bit more creative, show a bit more blue sky thinking about how they look at the personalisation agenda and the real needs of real children.

The other issue with research is that we have to be able to ask the right questions and be able to shift from the schooling paradigm to the alternative paradigm when we are thinking about it. The metrics that schooling uses are very limited and if these are our only means of analysing flexischooling then it's going to mean missing out on some of its major strengths. For instance flexischoolers bring something unique to the classroom in the way that they engage and work with other people and their peers and the way that they engage with learning.

Now that's really very refreshing but it is not something that is easy to assess. And, ultimately we have to look at the real outcomes of a flexischool education... so I would extend that beyond school and into the sorts of contributions that people are able to make to society, their values and their continuing ability to learn and to be creative and so on.

If all we have are the usual kinds of assessment data then my hunch is that flexischools could still come out favourably. Hollinsclough School have found their standard assessment data actually went up after the influx of flexischoolers but they know there is more than this partial and imperfect data. We need a whole range of evaluatory tools; new ways of judging an education.

HP: Who flexischools and why?

PH: Its natural constituency in the first instance are probably those families who have children who don't fit in with mainstream. They might be school phobic,

they might be special needs, they might be bullied—there are a range of children for which school is quite frankly a nightmare. Sometimes so much damage results that parents say “Enough is enough.” There is the choice of elective home education... fine and manageable for some but pragmatically other families can only accommodate it part of the time. Many families have no real complaint about school but recognise that it doesn't work totally for their kids. So there is a whole range of reasons as to why families choose to look at flexischooling.

Some people project an elitist image onto flexischooling, just as happens with home education, but actually this is nonsense. If you meet flexischoolers—the families are often very poor because they have made tremendous sacrifices. They are from all socio-economic backgrounds and certainly wouldn't be stereotyped as middle class. They are people who are passionate about their kid's needs and giving them happy successful learning pathways which they haven't got from full time schooling. They are prepared to forgo money, jobs and all the rest. Some travel phenomenal distances giving up enormous amounts of time. We've got people travelling an hour and a half and more to reach a school for a couple of days a week. That's dedication! So I reject that elitist charge although I suspect the middle-class would probably like the idea! After all it reflects the more flexible approach to life and work that is emerging in the twenty-first century. Flexible work forces, flexible lives—the old norms and linear view of school, college, university, job, retire, die. That has been unsettled somewhat in some areas of society—we don't have to have continuous employment, we can take gaps,

we don't have to do everything in the traditional order, we have flexitime, multiple roles and multiple experiences. If these opportunities are growing in life and work then why shouldn't they with flexible learning pathways. For the families who are doing this, it is a continuous investment. They don't abdicate education to the school; they take an uninterrupted and active part in it. More people now want this. They can see that this is a different kind of opportunity.

Looking at the schools who adopt flexischooling or who are flexischooling positive; there are two basic scenarios. One is the sort of flexischooling that has been going on for the past 40 years with one or two children slotted into odd schools across the country. Here the headteachers have listened to families and children and accommodated their needs flexibly because they have been persuaded it's in the best interests of the learner. The other, newer scenario concerns the small, undersubscribed rural school. Taking on considerable numbers of flexischoolers has been a lifeline which has enabled them to survive. It is now the case in some of these schools that the majority of pupils are flexischooled. In the last five years it seems to be something which small schools have cottoned on to. And it can have a unique transformational effect on them and of course their communities. Where the Heads might have gone into it thinking "This could save my school, what a good idea," they have gone on to have an awakening if you like, and it has helped them rethink how they look at education and learning... and there have been untold consequences... many of which are rather favourable.

HP: How can flexischooling help children with SEN?

PH: Flexischooling is particularly suited to a range of children with special needs. These may be children who don't fit the schooling model perfectly and for whom it does create undue stress or anxieties... perhaps the school pace is either too fast or too slow for them. Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) children have specific needs some of which are catered for very well by schools. ASD children like the regularity, the timetables, the routines, all those things which are predictable and stay the same. On the other hand, in terms of the curriculum, its pace and the way the learning goes it does present challenges for those ASD learners who need more time to process or need to engage when they are ready because they might have tuned out for a while. The expectation is that "normal learners" will be tuned in, actively listening all the time, able to work in groups and so on. You cannot guarantee that with an ASD learner. So what tends to happen is that the children get frustrated, get anxious, get less focussed and more distracted. They may go home and take it out in the home environment or withdraw completely. They may not get that chance to unwind, to process things in their own time. Clare Lawrence, teacher, author and mother of a couple of autistic kids has very powerfully described how the sensory overload of school can be balanced with the home environment. At home they are secure and the kid can have the space to be autistic... they can carry on with all those pre-dispositions which drive their passions without fear or favour knowing that parents will accommodate it all. It also allows sufficient time for parents to go over stuff with the children if they haven't

processed things sufficiently... to clarify, to take them forward and signpost what might be coming next. If the relationship between home and school is good they can actually work in tandem to ensure that the learner is in tune with what is coming up and has really gone through and thought through their learning. I think in terms of ASD a lot of families find that flexischooling gives them the best of both worlds. They can have that strong family time, the important emotional bonding and sufficient rehearsal of those social and emotional skills that are going to enable them to have functional and successful lives. So, many of these families have found flexischooling very, very useful.

The other thing about flexischooling is how it prompts less rigid responses. Flexibility of provision within the school can be an important element for SEN children. As a Head I used to use those flexibilities. I'll give you an example. We had a Down's Syndrome child who was in mainstream and we were able to give that child, who was 7, a portfolio of experiences in school that ranged from nursery with its free play and independence right the way through to his age appropriate peer learning experiences. During the day and week he would range across the school. This child was not just a member of Class 3; he was a member of the whole school; drawing learning experiences from wherever he needed to meet his profile of learning needs and his own motivations. He was in four or five classes and it was great. His social integration within the wider school was actually enhanced by that and his experience of school was infinitely improved. Previously he used to cry, become utterly distressed and not want to

come into school because he had just had enough. This anxiety was lifted. Learning and enjoyment followed.

Overall, if you have an age-stage based and prescribed curriculum you are going to have the round pegs that fit nicely and the square pegs that don't into that progression... and sadly, they will be some of the kids who are labelled special needs. It is clear, to a great extent, that mainstream schooling creates a large part of its own special needs industry. In this deficit model millions of pounds are wasted trying to correct issues of its own making. It can originate from the simplest thing like having a summer birthday. Some kids spend the rest of their lives trying to catch up with age peers... Many of course don't and remain labelled and disconnected from learning. Others might get close but it can proceed right the way through to degree level where they typically get a 2:2 instead of a 2:1. Or it can be something like a minor developmental delay, dyslexia or whatever. It's an outrage that the system insists on trying to fit the learner to its curriculum and assessment offer. The fall out is disastrous and the implications often life-long. You've also got gifted kids who are going to sleep in mainstream schools, not having their needs met... why should they be put through 15, 16 years of torture (Roland Meighan describes this as "day prison") with something that they are not suited to? The pedagogy in schools is not sufficiently creative and not sufficiently adaptive and not appropriately learner-led. Those kids deserve something better and if they can pursue that through self-managed learning at home with the guidance of the school, family, friends whoever—then I

say, let it happen! Flexischooling at least permits the opportunity for that to occur.

HP: What are the motivations and effects of flexischooling?

PH: It all depends on why families have gone into flexischooling. For those with a straightforward reason—my child has been bullied terribly, my child is school phobic, my child has a specific challenge and can't cope with full-time school, then flexischooling is a good arrangement... the best of both worlds. Others might be home educating parents who adopt a more formal "school at home" approach, and might just request to follow the school curriculum at home. That's fine as well. But equally for some there could be more philosophical reasons driving the choice of flexischooling. They might be autonomous home educators but want to keep in touch with what is happening in mainstream schools... they may want to keep up contacts with schooled peer groups or with some of the national curriculum. This may benefit when it comes to access to accreditation or assessments which can be a nightmare for some home educators.

There are so many reasons for flexischooling; you can't pigeon hole it; each example is unique and is negotiated case by case, child by child. This is one of the transformational elements of flexischooling. It is a wakeup call for us all because it exposes so clearly the rigidity of imposed age-stage curriculum, systems. When I see the Heads of Hollinsclough and Erpingham¹ who had no background in alternative education, no prior understanding or experience of flexischooling turn to ask heretical questions about learning then I think hearts and minds are being won over here. They have entered areas of thinking not

previously on their radar. That indicates people can start to think in different ways. All the testimonies of the learners, families, schools and teachers are very persuasive.

The central thing about flexischooling is that it is a local agreement developed by all key stakeholders. It's not imposed—no one is saying next September every school is a flexischool. It is destined to work because you have got three consenting parties—a consenting school, a consenting family and a consenting learner who work something out. Everybody is on board. So if it isn't working they come back and talk. It is a continuous negotiation. And to my mind that is the key as to why flexischooling is so efficient. Mainstream schooling is brilliant in its inefficiency – it has so much redundancy and superficial learning. It is... "You will do in this, in this order, through this progression and to this time scale." Flexischoolers and home educators have the opportunity to go as fast or as slow as needed and also to do just what is necessary. When young people need to access jobs and careers that require accreditation, then they will set about that task with focus and commitment; often in shortened time scales because they're not bogged down with all the superfluous stuff that school will force on them.

HP: What about the other children in the school? How do they tend to feel about their flexischooling peers?

PH: They are just used to seeing these flexischoolers on a different basis to which they see their 100% schooled peers. It is the case that in all the settings I have observed there has been no visible difference in the way that they respond to each other. It's all been very positive.

Flexischools are not identifying any issues at all. I believe that kids are far more sophisticated, and able to deal with difference than we give them credit for. Clearly, parents and students will ask questions and that's natural and a good thing because maybe they will say, "Okay I wouldn't mind trying that as well! Could this be something that we are interested in?" So, from where I stand with my educational philosophy that has a transformational potential in broadening choice and opportunity in the educational landscape.

HP: So what exactly is this transformational potential and what effect does flexi-schooling have on pedagogy?

PH: I think flexischooling stimulates a pedagogical debate because it invites different ways of thinking about how you can approach working with children and how you can work across whole ranges of age and attainment in different areas. As time goes by teachers can start to rethink their pedagogical approaches and look at ways of creating learning bridging the boundaries of home-school settings. For example... learning which could grow around self-directed research projects that the learner could engage in at school and at home. This could mean a shift in pedagogy that leans towards facilitative, challenge and cocreation roles for the teacher with a greater emphasis on self-directed, self-managed learning. Let's not ignore the skills of good teachers though. The best teachers can differentiate across an enormous age and attainment range. Early years practitioners do this all the time as do those in the small schools where teachers may be teaching across 4

to 5 years at a time in one class, one key stage. These skills need to be shared throughout all schools so that flexibility becomes the core of all classrooms. Rather than teaching in ways which create dependency and jumping through hoops teaching needs to focus on independence and interdependence. It requires a pedagogical shift. Teachers can accommodate this quite successfully. If "The Tudors" are being studied the conventional approach is to teach to a planned script with a variety of activities designed to promote engagement. Alternatively, the learner's own interests could be accommodated from the outset and a cocreated plan designed to support that learning. Ultimately, the learner should take an active and lead role in their own learning. The teacher and those who support learning should provide challenge and guidance. Once again I'm talking about a move that puts the learner and not the curriculum centre stage.

Schooling is a proxy, a shorthand for an education. It relies on proxy indicators—principally exams assessments but these things aren't "an education" and are questionable at the least. They can be indicators of competences, although often passing ones, but the outcomes are importantly broader than this... the lives lived by people, the work that people do, the contributions they make to society, their ability to be part of a family, to be healthy mentally, physically, to continue life-long learning and so on. These indicators are uncovered in longitudinal research, that's about biography and things which can't be pinned down to a one, two or three hour test. Accreditation per se does not impress me; let's not forget that PhDs built the gas chambers. I am

interested in what people do and in their lives and their contributions and their ability to hold the stuff of society together. Now flexischooling, like home education, can assist in readdressing that myopic and limited focus of schooling alone. We can begin to explore a real education.

Flexischooling is one small possibility within a whole range of ideas that drives our organisation. These are about invitational learning and assessment, about self-determination and about families and children determining their own educational pathways in the settings they choose. These may change throughout that journey

to meet the learner's goals. They are not a limited age-stage curriculum offer that has been taken "off the peg"—it's more clever than that, it's bespoke, a bit more sophisticated and there is a lot more control. I recognise that is not for everybody philosophically or practically but there is no problem in it being an opportunity for people who wish to find their way through the educational landscape in more creative ways. It may just offer some real insight to the development and improvement of all our learning systems and principally that of schooling.

Notes

¹ Hollinsclough School and Erpingham School, in Staffordshire and Norfolk respectively, are both rural small primary schools which have embraced flexischooling in recent years.

Resources and Further Reading

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Organisations

www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk
www.hollinsclough.staffs.sch.uk
www.erpinghamprimaryschool.co.uk

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Harriet Pattison is working on a PhD at School of Education, University of Birmingham on home educated children's autonomous paths into literacy. She is mired in the question of whether informal education can ever be effectively understood through the epistemological restrictions of formal education. She is also books and interview editor for *Other Education* and keen to invite would-be book reviewers to get directly in touch.



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