

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### A Plea for More Tightly Focused Research

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The January 2013 edition of this journal included a piece by Robert Kunzman and Milton Gaither on existing research into home education. They found the researchers had met with many problems. “First and foremost,” they say, “the literature is almost entirely qualitative in nature. While many of these qualitative studies are ambitious and imaginative, taken as a whole, homeschooling research has an anecdotal quality it has yet to transcend.” (Kunzman & Gaither 2013, p. 5).

There is little numerical data to work on, and, “Additionally, homeschoolers are a notoriously difficult demographic to study because of the diversity of individuals engaged in the practice.” (p. 5) Kunzman and Gaither also found that much of the existing research had been conducted by bodies with prejudices either for or against home education, with a large number performed under the auspices of a prominent American homeschooling advocacy group, HSLDA, the Home School Legal Defence Association.

These four problems—the anecdotal quality of the evidence, the variety of the individuals (and organisations) involved, the lack of numerical data and the

prejudice of many researchers—are also faced by anyone seeking to evaluate democratic education.

Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne, writing about Carl Rogers’ person-centred counselling, describe two other problems shared with research into alternatives. First, that it lays primary stress on the relationship between counsellor and client (read teacher and child), and secondly that it “travels light as far as theoretical concepts are concerned.” This means that “both in academic and professional circles the person-centred approach can sometimes be dismissed as facile or superficial, or even castigated as naive or misguidedly optimistic.” (Mearns & Thorne 1988, p. 5).

Democratic education is often castigated as naive or misguidedly optimistic. Rousseau is mocked by people who do not seem to have ever read *Emile*, and my first book, *Considering Children*, was described by a prejudiced reviewer as “Curried Neill in Duane sauce,” as if any association with Curry, Neill or Duane was a proof of unreliability.

The actual experiences of democratic educators seem to carry no weight. Here are a few particularly striking examples

personally known to me. A boy came into my class at Dartington Hall School at the age of ten, and when I asked him to read the two or three indecipherable lines he had written in beautiful handwriting told me, after some thought, “That word must be ‘uncle’ because it begins with a q.” He is now an educational psychologist. At Sands School, Ashburton, where I spent the last years of my teaching career, a young teenager arrived having, as she says herself, “virtually given up speaking.” She is now director of a national charity. A boy who came to Sands having been told at his comprehensive school that he would only get five Ds in his GCSEs, went on to university to get a first class degree in philosophy. Such stories cannot be translated into statistics and can easily be dismissed as atypical. Yet they are common transformations in alternative, democratically inclined education, not to be dismissed.

In most democratic schools there is no required curriculum, so every child makes personal choices. No general statistics can convey the variety of personal aims. The creator of Hovercam, the first company to deal in remote-controlled flying video-cameras, spent most of his time at Dartington Hall School making model aeroplanes, a subject in which there were no lessons and no exams. Israel’s first ever Olympic gold medal was won in 2004 by a windsurfer from the Democratic School of Hadera. Such achievements are impressive, but they are obviously unique in character and not easily evaluated across frames of competitive “tables” of achievement. Perhaps this is why accounts of individual successes in democratic environments carry so little weight?

Researchers often prefer to use more

scientific approaches, if they can, than one-instance qualitative stories. In 1996 Kathleen Cotton published a paper on research into small schools in the USA. From the 103 documents she reviewed, she drew many conclusions, for instance: There is “a much greater sense of belonging (sometimes expressed as a lower level of alienation) among students in small schools than in large ones”; that students’ academic and general self-concepts are higher in small schools than in large ones; students in small schools “take more of the responsibility for their own learning, learning activities are more frequently individualized, classes are smaller, and scheduling is much more flexible” and “Student social behaviour—as measured by truancy, discipline problems, violence, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation—is more positive in small schools.” (Cotton, 1996, online document, no page numbers).

“Despite this persuasive support for small schools,” she concludes, “a gap remains — indeed grows — between research and practice regarding school size.” She quotes D. T. Williams, who says, “The preponderance of professional literature in the past decade indicates that educational researchers support the concept of small school effectiveness. It appears, however, that the determinants of school size are seldom the result of research. . . . More often, school size is the result of other factors—political, economic, social, demographic.” (ibid.).

This view has been confirmed by the neglect of persuasive statistics recorded about specific schools within the English state system. Risinghill School, for instance, was formed in 1960 from four separate schools for the less able. Michael

Duane was appointed as the head teacher. When his staff agreed to do without corporal punishment there was a period of chaos which took a year to subside. Although Risinghill was supposed to be a comprehensive school, taking children of all abilities, there were still two grammar schools in the neighbourhood that creamed off the more academically gifted children. At that time the O-Level exams were only intended for the top 40% of the relevant age-group, and A-Level was for the elect, so it would not have been surprising if *none* of the 200 pupils in the relevant age-group at Risinghill had even attempted the O-Level exams. These are the actual results:

	O-level entrant	Number passing at least 1 (average of 3-4)	A-Level entrant	Univ entrant
1960	18	5	0	0
1961	32	16	0	0
1963	39	20	0	0
1964	59	34	0	0
1965	80	42	3	2

Additionally, there were 98 children on probation in 1960 but by 1964 there were only nine (Berg, 1968).

In spite of these extraordinary achievements, recorded numerically, Michael Duane was dismissed by the local education authority and the school was closed.

A more recent misrepresentation of statistics contributed to the suspension of Andy Mattison, the Head of the William Booth Nursery and Infant School, in Nottingham, where children were allowed an unusual degree of freedom. As one aspect of an Ofsted inspection in

December 2010, parents were asked to comment on thirteen positive remarks about the school, ranging from “My child enjoys school” to “The teaching is good at this school.” They were asked to say whether they agreed strongly, agreed, disagreed or disagreed strongly. Out of approximately 650 comments, only one (about 0.15%) was mildly negative. The inspectors reported that “almost all” the comments were positive—an accurate but rather misleading summing up, totally ignoring the impact of 99.85% being positive.

In spite of the parental view, the inspectors considered they had found enough faults to justify a change of head teacher. There have been two inspections since the change. When you look on the web for the results of an up-to-date parents’ questionnaire in 2013 you reach an official Ofsted page with this announcement: “We are sorry but we only show the results for a school once we have received sufficient responses, which we have not yet received for this school.” Is this an excuse for concealing criticism from parents now that the head who led the school they so admired has been removed? Data about education doing “otherwise” can be obscured and misrepresented, as we saw with the Summerhill Ofsted debacle in 2000 also (see Cunningham, 2000).

There is also a deficit in quantity of some kinds of useful research. I know of only two examples of large-scale, detailed research into the effects of child-centred teaching. The first was *The Eight-Year Study* (Aikin, 1942) in the US, which looked at the college experiences of nearly 1,500 former students from progressive, experimental high schools featuring high

levels of student choice, project-based learning, and a focus on the whole child and compared it with the experiences of the same number of students from conventional high schools, marked by teacher-directed learning, lecture-style teaching and narrow curricula. Graduates from the more experimental schools had higher grades and more academic honours, showed higher levels of intellectual curiosity, demonstrated greater resourcefulness in responding to challenges, and had a more active concern for the world around them. Unfortunately the report came out in 1942, when the world was concerned with other matters. As far as I know it has not been widely quoted since.

A second, more recent, large-scale study is from India, in the state of Tamil Nadu. In 2007 ABL (Activity-Based Learning) was introduced in all 37,500 primary schools, involving five million children. The research data was collected the following year. The classes involved were II and IV, that is to say seven-year-olds and nine-year-olds.

ABL is based on Montessori methods. It allows children to choose their own activities and creates a good relationship between staff and pupils. The programme includes individual and small-group work, informal arrangement of the classroom and many creative activities, including art, music, dance and indoor and outdoor games.

These are some quotations from the report on the findings at the end of the first year:

**Average achievement of children increased significantly in all subjects:** During the end-year study the average achievement was

found to be 61.63% in Tamil, 74.45% in Mathematics and 70.62% in English in Class II; and in Class IV, the mean achievement in Tamil was 63.19, 63.01% in Mathematics and in English it was 52.33%. The figures revealed that as compared to the baseline study there was an increase of nearly 25% to 29% in all three subjects in both the classes. . .

**Gaps in achievement within gender, location and social groups was narrowed down:**

During baseline study, there was significant difference in achievement between boys and girls, urban and rural children, and children from different social communities. However, during the end-of-the-year study... no significant difference was found in Tamil achievement between rural and urban children and among the children of different social groups; in Mathematics achievement, there was significant difference found between boys and girls and children of different social group children; in English achievement, there was no significant difference between rural and urban and among boys and girls. . .

**More children shifted from low achievement range to very high and excellent achievement range:**

Number of low achievers reduced by 30% to 40% in all three subjects in both the classes and number of excellent achievers increased by 20% to 40% in all three subjects and both classes.

Seven other Indian states have begun to use ABL and are implementing it in a variety of ways. This implementation is being reviewed by UNICEF. Kent University, in Ohio, has done a historical study of ABL, but otherwise this huge Indian success story seems to have passed unnoticed elsewhere. Here is the full report:

<http://www.ssatefund.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=7p2yXnKaP7c%3D&tabid=2496>.

The advantages that democratic education is alleged to bestow are not simply improved test scores, like those shown in the Tamil Nadu research. They include such qualities as self-confidence, independence, purposefulness, concern for others, happiness, and a fully developed personality.

A striking example of the development of such qualities took place at The Terrace, in Conisbrough, a mining town in Yorkshire, when the school-leaving age was raised from 15 to 16 in 1973. Fifteen boys were chosen from among those considered least likely to gain anything from an extra year of schooling, and were put into a group away from the main school buildings. There they were allowed to decide, jointly, how they were going to spend their time. It was known as the ROSLA (Raising Of the School Leaving Age) experiment. The average attendance rate for the boys when they were still at school had been three days a week, or 60%. During the first three weeks at the Terrace it was 92%, 77% and 98%, and thereafter it never fell below 92%. (Duane, 1995) All fifteen went on to responsible careers, and two of them are alleged to have become millionaires.

Michael Duane wrote up the evidence from the ROSLA experiment for his M. Phil thesis. Pat Kitto, one of the staff members involved, wrote a book about The Terrace called *Dartington in Conisburgh* (2010). The ROSLA experiment occupies three of its seven chapters. Neither Pat Kitto's personal account, nor Michael Duane's professional assessment, has attracted the attention it deserves.

In the UK the only generally accepted criteria for success in education seem to be high grades in tests and exams. These are widely reported in league tables yet little attention is paid to more useful characteristics, such as a sense of purpose, the ability to get on with other people, trustworthiness, altruism, articulacy, imagination and self-confidence. The development of individual talents (such as, for instance, aeroplane design or wind-surfing) is not taken into account.

There are more recent examples of important research and reports, but on a smaller scale. In 2001, sixty years after the US based Aikin eight-year study, Derry Hannam visited sixteen schools in the UK, chosen because of their encouragement of student involvement in the running of their schools. He found that students in these comparatively democratic schools had higher self-esteem and better motivation than those in more conventional ones. There was less truancy and students even achieved higher scores in the GCSE exams than students with similar backgrounds in more traditional schools.

In 2012 Dana Bennis investigated ten to fifteen former students from each of three public high schools in the US, one traditional and the other two characterised by democratic decision-making and

equality between students and staff. (These two differed in that one had a timetable of conventional subjects, while the other offered more freedom in choice of activity.)

There was surprisingly little difference between the two democratic schools, but the differences between them and the conventional school were striking. Bennis found, for instance, that 100% of the alumni surveyed from both freedom-based schools strongly or moderately agreed that their school was cooperative, trusting, respectful, and democratic. Only 50% of the students from the conventional school agreed that it was cooperative, 33% considered it trusting, 41% considered it respectful, and only 16% strongly or moderately agreed that their school was democratic.

When Bennis moved on to assessing personal development and, in particular, self-confidence, curiosity, independence, compassion, responsibility, critical thinking and self-awareness, once again the free schools scored much more highly than the conventional school. The most striking contrast was in compassion. 100% of alumni from the less formal freedom-based school and 78% of alumni from the other freedom school strongly or moderately agreed that their school helped them develop compassion, but only 9% of the respondents from the conventional school did so. Details of this research can be found at <http://ebookbrowse.com/bennis-comparative-study-doc-d37448620>

One of the reasons such research is ignored may be that the amassing of data is not in itself enough to convince traditionalists, who do not want to have their assumptions questioned.

To convince them it does not seem to be enough to collect evidence and draw conclusions from it. Perhaps it might be more effective for researchers to test hypotheses, as scientists in other areas do, and as Donald Berg and Jennifer Henderlong Corpus did in the work reported in their article *Enthusiastic Students: a Study of Motivation in Two Alternatives to Mandatory Instruction* in the previous issue of *Other Education* (2013, Vol 2, issue 2).

Their modest conclusion is that “while there is clearly not enough data to make any claims regarding the efficacy of non-mandatory instruction per se, there is enough evidence in the literature to make the tentative claim that Self-Determination Theory is an empirically respectable framework that can and should be used to guide future research and innovation in schools.” (p. 58)

This is the kind of approach that is needed. Different elements of democratic education must be narrowly defined so that they can be assessed independently of other variables. The temptation is to argue about theories that are so closely interwoven that general conclusions are impossible. Is the staff-student relationship more important than the disciplinary framework? Does a programme of lessons interfere with a child's natural development? Is punishment counterproductive? The answers to such questions are usually: yes/no, that depends.

It might be better to start with cautious hypotheses such as these: Young people who are trusted are more likely to be trustworthy than those who are not trusted. Or: If young people are treated with consideration and respect, they are more

likely to show consideration and respect for others.

Unfortunately those who believe that the purpose of education is purely the passing on of knowledge will find such proposals irrelevant. They believe that there is a certain body of knowledge that everyone needs to master, and that the principal duty of any school is to convey that knowledge. They are sure that we all need, for instance, to know about exponential and trigonometric relationships, to be able to discuss a writer's choice of vocabulary, form and grammatical and structural features, and to understand cell biology as well as electron microscopy (all examples taken from Michael Gove's new curriculum, June 2013).

Very few adults who have sat through lessons on such topics will have remembered anything of the supposedly "taught" information. Even fewer will ever

actually use it. When you need information you learn it quickly and effectively. When you do not see its relevance and have no reason to use it, you quickly forget it. This suggests another possible hypothesis—people who study what has relevance for them learn more effectively than those who follow a prescribed curriculum.

The Berg and Henderlong research was published in 2013. ABL was introduced in Tamil Nadu in 2007. The Hannam report came out in 2001. Kathleen Cotton's work was published in 1996. The Terrace in Conisbrough ran from 1973-1975. The Aiken eight year study in the US was completed in 1942. Advocates of democratic education have made little progress. We need to do more to escape the fate of the Rogerians and being "dismissed as facile or superficial, or even castigated as naive or misguidedly optimistic." (Mearns & Thorne 1988, p. 5).

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