

Homeschooling in the United Kingdom

Claire Novak

Ten-year-old Rowan Bedford always expressed an interest in the practical side of life. Give him an option between a fantasy tale and an instruction manual and he'd choose the nonfiction material every time. At home, his parents gave him biographies and how-to books to read, going with the flow of Rowan's learning style. But in school, the British child's reading assignments were made up of page after page of modern boys' fiction, a genre he and his parents hated because of the unfailing presentations of bad behavior in each story.

Because Rowan's reading skills were below his grade level—and perhaps magnified by dislike for the force-fed reading materials—he was placed in a special needs group where, according to his father, Neal Bedford, “he simply cried all day.” To solve the problem, Bedford did what many parents in the UK are doing; he withdrew his son from public school and began teaching him at home.

The Legal Situation in the UK

Homeschooling is a fast-growing method of education in the UK, where curriculum quality and teaching standards are on a steady decline. Many parents, particularly in London, withdraw their children to give them extended amounts of private tutoring because they are not progressing well at school. According to former primary teacher Ross Mountney, the average valuable teacher time (not necessarily one-on-one) that each child receives in a British school per day amounts to a staggering seven minutes.

“People think it's easy for me to home educate as they know I was a primary teacher,” Mountney says. “What most people don't know is that I gave up teaching in disgust when the National Curriculum came in, and that much of what I saw in schools, like the disrespectful way children are sometimes treated, the cloning of their abilities, and the unhappy environment many schools create, was the reason I now home educate.”

Education laws in England state that while it is the legal duty of parents to educate their children, they are not required to send them to school. According to section 7 of the Education Act of 1996, “The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education ... either by regular attendance at school *or otherwise*” [emphasis added]. Currently, the law doesn't require parents to register their children with any school. They're not obliged to seek permission from the Local Education Authority (LEA) to educate at home, nor are they asked to have any teaching or other educational qualifications of their own. Testing is entirely voluntary for homeschoolers, as are record-keeping and lesson-planning. This extreme legal freedom allows many parents to simply take their children's education into their own hands, but it also causes confusion on the part of education authorities who are of often given conflicting directions when it comes to dealing with homeschoolers.

For instance, Sections 437-433 of the Education Act of 1996 require that LEAs within England and Wales take action if they believe that a child is not receiving a suitable education. However, according to researcher Sean Gabb in his *Home Schooling: A British Perspective* (2004), “In the case of *R V Gwent County Council ex parte Perry* (1985), the courts held that the [LEA] should give parents ‘a fair and reasonable opportunity to satisfy it that proper education is being provided’” Gabb goes on to comment on the confusion that often occurs between education authorities (who fill a role similar to a US school superintendent) and homeschooling parents. “The legal duty placed on [LEAs] applies only where children appear not to be receiving a suitable education. Where no evidence is available . . . they have no legal right to seek information from parents.”

Historical Roots Strengthen Homeschoolers Today

Home education has a long history in Britain, where members of the Royal family have been tutored at home for generations. In fact, the children of the current Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, were the first in that line to receive public education. The Queen herself was educated at home by private tutors, as were Queen Victoria and King George III. Famous British historical figures—including Isaac Newton, John and Charles Wesley, Jane Austen, and Agatha Christie—all had little or no formal education.

Throughout the early twentieth century, formal schooling was by no means universal and until the late 1950s was considered one option among many. From 1950 to 1970, there was a continuous debate between Christians and the state over the nature of religious instruction in the state schools. Today, the educational system’s adoption of the National Curriculum (which is primarily atheistic in nature), provides a good cause for concern from Christian parents. Unfortunately, most Christians fail to realize the atheistic foundations of this curriculum, and even fewer choose to homeschool their children.

“Many church leaders come from the ‘school never did me any harm’ way of thinking,” British homeschooler Jane Bullivant told TOS.

As a Christian freelance writer and mother of three, Bullivant is especially aware of the attitude of the church toward homeschoolers. “They may not be aware that modern schools do not have the morality, discipline, and Christian basis that many schools had 30 years ago,” she says. In fact, until the schools’ moral decline in the 1970s, homeschooling may not have been regarded as highly necessary as it is today. Researchers believe that in the ’70s there were probably no more than 20 Christian families in the UK who were homeschooling their children.

“[The small number of homeschoolers in the ’70s] was surprising because home education in Britain has always been legal, and its practitioners have rarely had to face the hurdles placed in the way of their American counterparts,” says Roger Slack, a member of the group Home Service, the leading support organization for Christian homeschoolers in the UK. “By American standards, home education in Britain [seems like] a small phenomenon,” Slack told TOS. “Nevertheless, there has been considerable growth in the last 30 years.”

While exact numbers are hard to provide (very little research has been done on homeschooling in the UK), current estimates range from 15,000 to 50,000 home-educated children, less than 1% of the school-age population. The large variance in figures is due mostly to reporters and debating politicians, who have been known to confuse numbers or simply make up their own. Another difficulty in estimating the number of homeschoolers in the UK is the loose definition of the term “homeschooling.” In fact, the term can apply to anything under the large umbrella of “otherwise,” the legal word that provides for teaching children outside of State-run schools. It can refer to children who have never been to school, those who attend infrequently with a leave of absence, those who receive private tutoring, and those who go to school for several years after or before being taught at home, among others.

Regardless of the lack of research, one fact remains clear: the number of homeschooling families has risen dramatically in the past 30 years. An increase in media coverage and a decrease in reasons to keep children *in* State-run schools indicate that a large number of parents are taking their children’s education back into their own hands. “No one can deny that we are a growing movement and that God is blessing those who . . . are choosing to teach their own at home,” Roger Slack told TOS.

Homeschooling for Future Generations

Parents in the UK choose homeschooling for two main reasons—because they fear the lack of discipline among students and are concerned with the safety of their children, and because they are dissatisfied with the quality or ideology of the curriculum offered by the schools. For instance, in one term of 2003, 12,800 children in Britain were suspended from school for attacking other pupils, while 336 were expelled for the same reason. 4,000 others were suspended and 280 expelled for assaulting adults. And while these numbers may be considerably smaller than those recorded in America, the problem of bullying is on the increase. It is also combined with social problems including gang fights, substance abuse, and sexual promiscuity, all issues that cause great concern not only in the UK but also in America. “The playground is not the ‘social feast’ people make it out to be,” Jane Bullivant told TOS. “It’s a dog-eat-dog world where a lairish attitude comes as a standard.”

Although vehemently denied by education officials, the truth is that an honest look at the performance of most upper-level students in the UK shows declining standards in all areas of learning, not just discipline [see sidebar]. And according to 63-year-old British citizen Alan Watkins, the education offered when he was a child did much more toward preparing students for adulthood. “It was disciplined and ordered, both things you need if you are to truly learn,” he told Channel 4, a popular British television network. “We learned in an atmosphere without disruption. It was pure study—and interestingly, I was learning things at 8 and 9 that my children did not reach until they were 13 or 14.” Watkins speaks for a large percentage of both the British and American public when he says, “I believe that the decline of standards, both of knowledge and behavior, can be linked absolutely to the decline of our schools.”

While most citizens are concerned solely with declining educational and behavioral standards, Christian citizens also have to look at the moral issues surrounding the state-run versus home education debate. Many of homeschooling's key opponents in the UK are calling for regulation and compulsory *attendance* rather than education, and while their attempts to regulate homeschooling have not turned into legal battles as in America, it is only a matter of time before the situation escalates. Shocking insults have been thrown against homeschooling parents, including one by journalist Mark Brown, who states, "With no experience of school, the ... kids will hear very few views other than those of their parents. As devout Christians, can [these] couple[s] really be trusted to give a balanced picture where questions such as evolution or sex education are concerned?" But can the pro-evolution, safe sex teachings that Brown condones be called "balanced"? Of course not—they reflect a bias toward one ideology, while Christian homeschoolers prefer another.

For Christians in the UK today, the need to recognize homeschooling as a viable method of education is strong. "The greatest problem at the moment is that home education is sidelined by the Christian community," Roger Slack told TOS. "Many home educators feel isolated in their own congregations."

"The general feeling is that homeschooling is shielding children from 'real' life, denying them social interaction with other children," says Jane Bullivant. "That's a far cry from the reality at our house; we're always being overrun with friends coming over to play and homeschool activities in the community, not to mention all the clubs they attend."

Perhaps journalist Sean Gabb (whose writings on homeschooling provide a generally fair and balanced view) successfully sums up the need for Christian support and the urgency of the situation when he offers a frightening look at the hidden beliefs of many education officials and university professors. He writes, "Parents who choose homeschooling are taking children away from schools where they might otherwise be taught how to help build a new kind of society in which everyone will accept the common doctrines of political correctness." Although Gabb makes his statement as a reason to oppose homeschooling, it should actually motivate the Christian community to regard the method in a positive light—for by teaching their children to think for themselves and rely on moral principles as a base for their decisions, homeschoolers in the UK will help slow the growth of this dangerous "new society" and assure that the moral doctrines of *truth* and *justice* do not vanish completely from their land.

Biographical Information

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