The affirmation of ordinary life: curricula structure for home education

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Introduction

The issue of elective home education (EHE) has recently moved up the government agenda with a number of public consultations and the publication of the Badman Report (DCSF, 2009). The later now subject to review, especially in regard to the veracity of some of its claims. In this paper, I want to move towards a reasoned account of elective home education and specifically a curricula structure. This is of course politically sensitive, not least because in doing so I want to question presuppositions built into State funded schooling. In fact, one criticism of the Badman Report is that it fails to sufficiently critique its ‘schooling’ assumptions.

The central aim is to illuminate the question as to what a ‘suitable’ and ‘efficient’ education might look like, both in terms of its structure and its pedagogy. As Badman notes:

“The terms “efficient” and “suitable” education are not defined in law, despite the detailed prescription of expectations in schools. Case law has broadly described an “efficient” education as one that “achieves that which it sets out to achieve”. A “suitable” education is one that:

“primarily equips a child for life within the community of which he is a member, rather than the way of life in the country as a whole, as long as it does not foreclose the child’s options in later years to adopt some other form of life if he wishes to do so”.’ (Badman, 2009:6)

However, he shies away from offering a reasonable account of what this might look like. One can see the political sense in this because what is seen to be principally at stake is parents’ rights to decide what types of educational experiences their children have. This paper seeks to build towards structuring those educational experiences in ways that both reflect EHE and that are educationally defensible. Such a structure uses ‘ordinary life’ as the context for education, and seeks to formalise this theoretically in terms of MacIntyre’s (1985) thesis in ‘After Virtue’. (Theoretically formalise that is rather than suggest a practical formalisation of the curriculum.) The account focuses on the introduction of children to a range of social practices, and thinking through what kind of life is worth living. Of course this means that a child home educated in Birmingham is not prepared for life in northern Canada, but this is neither a

1 The DCSF has used a range of strategies to reject FOI requests for the data on which the claims were made. However, my judgement of the statistics released are that the data was not understood by those writing the report and inappropriate assumptions were made.
requirement of policy, or an outcome of schooling, or I would suggest a key requirement of education of the child.

Before detailing what this curricula structure might look like, I want to put in place a number of building blocks, in particular to set out explicitly what education is for, and the various roles of the State in relation to this. I then want to briefly discuss Taylor’s (1989) account of the affirmation of ordinary life as a dominant conception of the good. Taylor’s account offers a helpful motif to understand EHE, though I do not want to claim that EHE is necessarily grounded in this conception of the good.

**ii. Education, schooling, and upbringing**

Taylor notes that one element of the ‘the affirmation of ordinary life’ as a conception of the good is the transformation of the relationship between parents and children:

‘...we see a growing idealization of marriage based on affection, true companionship between husband and wife, and devoted concern for the children.’ (Taylor, 1989:289)

‘And this change is linked to a third...sentiment takes on a greater importance. And thus the sentiments of love, concern, and affection for one’s spouse come to be cherished, dwelt on, rejoiced in, and articulated, Something similar occurs with the affection of parents for children. And partly as a result, childhood takes on an identity as a separate phase of the life cycle, with its peculiar feelings and needs.’ (ibid:291)

This, Taylor claims is not to say that parents simply begin to love each other and their children, this was already present, but:

*It is not the actual place of affection but the sense of its importance. What changes is not that people begin loving their children or feeling attraction for their spouses, but they these dispositions come to be seen as a crucial part of what makes life worthy and significant. Whereas previously these dispositions were taken as banal...now they are seen as endowed with crucial significant.’ (ibid:292)

Thus, there emerges a central concern for parents in the upbringing of their children, and a broader, though weaker, concern with the upbringing of children in general. Upbringing is concerned with enabling children (and young people) to be able to flourish in our type of society, that is upbringing is concerned with their future well-being, as well as their present well-being. This is clearly a matter of some concern in the UK at the present time, where the well-being and future well-being of our children is not comparable to children in other countries. An aspect of upbringing is *education*, that is the conscious activity of adults to enable children to develop knowledge, skills and dispositions, through direct ‘teaching’ or the presentation of rich learning environments. For example, taking a child to a

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2 The cultural shift Taylor identifies as the affirmation of ordinary life occurs co-terminously with the shift towards the need to universalise one’s moral concerns, though this is often limited, to tribe, class or community (1989:4)

3 Generally here I prefer the term ‘child(ren)’ rather than ‘young people’; parents have children, teachers and youth workers have young people/students.
A stately home can lead to opportunities for direct teaching, as well as providing a context for the child to learn, perhaps that a number of adults in this society take their history seriously, or that history can be active and fun, etc. Similarly, taking them to a ‘play barn’ helps them tackle new physical challenges, learn about their bodies, and engagement with peers in a frenetic environment. (There are a number of different types of education that could be mentioned here both within and outside the home, directed by parents, siblings, wider family, youth workers, teachers, sports coaches, etc.)

Schools offer a particularly site for aspects of education, and upbringing more generally. So, we see schools as institutions (and here I will limit the discussion to the various types of state schools) that have an educative function, *schooling*, as well as a range of other functions concerned with welfare, public health, etc. which emerge from their almost universal access to young people. Thus, schools offer public sites were government can ‘impose’ a range of policies on the lives of young people because they have no choice but to attend for their *schooling*, except for EHE children. The question of schooling is a complex and much debated issue; here I make only two comments. Firstly, schooling is conducted within particular places (schools), with generally universal features (classrooms, textbooks, etc.), with a set routine (timetables, limited access to teachers, set times for ‘play’, lunch, etc.), and rigid and artificial relationships between persons, both peers and adults and children. Secondly, schooling concerns itself primarily with a limited learning agenda, structured in relation to a ‘forms of knowledge’ type curriculum, with some added formal education in citizenship and personal skills. In more general terms, it is primarily concerned with the development of theoretical knowledge rather than wisdom (see Hirst, 1999; Davies, 2003 for critiques of forms of knowledge curricula in liberal education). Simply but, schooling is unnatural and limited to a limited range of knowledge domains, whose contribution to human well-being is questionable.

There may of course be a range of good reasons for this particular manifestation of an aspect of education in both philosophical and organisational terms. However, I am yet to be convinced, more persuasive is the view that we have ended up somewhere which is good for no one, but the path back looks steeply uphill. In what follows I take it that schooling and education in general can only be justified as aspects of upbringing, and the well-being of children and the broader society. I want to briefly move on now to consider the respective roles of the State and the family in this task of upbringing.

**Upbringing, the State and the family.**

The ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ is primarily, as a cultural turn, concerned with an emerging conception of the good. This is a matter I will deal with in the next section. However, related to this is a conception of the ordering of society and particularly the limitations placed on the liberal State by its citizens. This ought not to surprise us given the co-terminous development of this conception of the good and modern liberal democracies. In relation to my argument here, I am concerned with two aspects of this ordering, though the distinction is not hard and fast, it is illuminating for the analysis to come. The first

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4 The term here is not meant pejoratively, but to indicate that the State does not need to negotiate, or work, with other social agents.
is the role of the State in managing corporate agreement on the key principles that ought to govern our lives, and the limits of those principles. For example, in relation to State funded goods, the distribution ought to be equitable to all citizens, but in the family I am allowed to disproportionately share my love with my daughter compared with her friends. In fact not only am I allowed to, it is expected. So some principles apply to all in all contexts (public and private), and others are principles that govern our public life. The second formulation of the State’s power is that involved in ordering and managing tasks that are required by all or most citizens and are thought best achieved by corporate activity. Here the State is a manager of tasks that we ‘club together’ to deliver, there is room for individuals and individual families to establish an alternative means of delivering what is required, so long as this does not produce harm to individuals or the wider society. Where this is making sure the refuse is collected this might be a minor issue to find alternatives, where education of a child is concerned we have a deal with a range of moral issues, that is there is a legitimate need to argue as to what is in the best interests of the child. The question of managing schools is often, and I think in Badman, confused with the question of what in principle are ought we to be doing to support the upbringing of children, and what are the real risks we must avoid.

The ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ as an ordering principle, also gives rise to structural limitations on the actions of the State. We accept that the State ought only to involve itself in families, private businesses, and local fraternal associations with very strong arguments. These are matters of private association and not a matter for the State, unless there are good reasons and evidence of harm. So, although the State has open access to investigate and act within public space, as another organisational actor; it is limited from acting in other private spaces in order to preserve its ‘liberal’ dimension. In managing a particular aspect of children’s education (and hence their upbringing) the State not only manages, but draws children out of the private sphere into the public, and hence is free to act without these constraints. EHE offers an alternative means of providing the education necessary for upbringing and, in addition, the child remains within the private world of the family and local associations.

Let us return to the first aspect of the ordering power of the State. In relation to the upbringing of children, what ought the State to be able to demand beyond that required for the continued well-being of the child? Here I want, largely, to follow White’s (1990) argument. The State has a responsibility to require young citizens to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to maintain a liberal democracy. One of the requirements for a liberal democracy is the autonomy of citizens (though autonomy of a limited kind) and this requires the ability to develop and act upon rational desires. Within the debates on autonomy the term ‘rational’ has acquired some negative baggage, and I prefer to use the term ‘reasonable’. We want children to grow up able to resist the manipulation of others and the unreasonableness of their own minds (for example, the desire to eat chocolate for all meals). The State then reasonably requires that children develop that required to perpetuate liberal democracy, though that this is a long way from having the right to inspect that it is occurring. In addition to the general themes of White’s work, there is also a need for citizens to accept the essentials of the ways things are

5 I will return shortly to Taylor’s account of ordinary life, but I would argue that Taylor highlights three aspects of ordinary life: family, work and neighbourliness.
done around here, that is the ordering in the first sense, the fact that we limit a life of nature through
the restriction of our personal freedoms, we are not perfectly autonomous. Upbringing needs to enable
children to explore the limits of freedom, as well as develop the intellectual resources necessary for its
acquisition.

I want to explore this in more detail in section iv, in part to develop arguments made earlier (see Davies,
2003) that White’s account of what is required to live life well within a liberal democracy is too thin.

iii. Ordinary life as a good

Taylor argues that one of the central cultural shifts of the enlightenment was a move towards an
affirmation of ordinary life as a central and respectable good for individuals to pursue. Taylor seems to
identify three aspects of this affirmation of ordinary life. The first and most significant in his account is
the changing conception of the significance of the family (see earlier). This change can perhaps be seen
in our views of the warrior. The warrior pursues a particular conception of the good, driven by the
development of a range of activities associated with the martial arts, physical prowess, and strategy.
Traditionally the warrior does not see a conflict between their pursuit

of this good and their family, they
have an heroic conception of the good. There is no compromise to be made between two goods of the
heroic pursuit of honour, and family life. This is difficult to imagine in those brought up in liberal
democracies embracing such a single focused pursuit of the warrior good, without recognising the
compromise being made. Mill (1991) recognises this in claiming that we do not accept an act as
heroic

because of the nature of the act, but because of what it achieves. Heroes are heroes because they
achieve something of great value than that lost.

The second aspect of ordinary life is the value of ordinary work, this Taylor directly links to the
development of protestant Christianity (particularly in mainland Europe). This is to be contrasted by the
good of the monastic life, in which the individual seeks the good through a withdrawal from ordinary life
in order to pursue religious virtue. The ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ imbues the normal day-to-day work
with a sense and calling of ‘vocation’. Thus, in pursuing one’s vocation one contributed as a member of a
wider society, and this was an element of the good, not simply a means of achieving the financial
resources to pursue life.

The third element Taylor draws attention to is what I term ‘neighbourliness’. Ordinary life is lives out in
relation to a range of others beyond the family, and the good is intimately connected with the
development of fraternal associations. The order of these elements seems to be important, the fraternal
associations emerge not simply from individuals, but from families.6

It is worth noting that in discussing this cultural shift in the enlightenment towards the ‘affirmation of
ordinary life’ there is also an underlying conception of the political task at work. I briefly inferred this in
the section above. In particular, a conception which, Jonathan Sacks has recently argued is more self-

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6 It is clear that for Taylor the family forms the lynch pin of the ‘affirmation of ordinary life’.
consciously held in north America than in the UK. Commenting on Barak Obama’s inaugural speech in January, he writes:

‘But how many fully understood precisely what he was doing? He was doing something almost unintelligible in terms of British political culture yet central to that of the US. He was, and knew he was, renewing the covenant...

There is a fundamental difference between contracts and covenants. In a contract, two or more individuals, each pursuing their own interest, come together to make an exchange for mutual benefit. When we pay someone to do something for us, implicitly or explicitly we make a contract.

A covenant is something different. In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, come together in a bond of mutual responsibility to do together what neither can achieve alone. It is not about interests but about loyalty, fidelity, holding together when events seem to be driving you apart. A covenant is less like a deal than like a marriage: it is a moral bond.’ (Sacks, 2009)

There are two aspects of ‘the affirmation of ordinary life’ which seem then to be at odds with the top level account of child well-being as articulated in the ‘Every Child Matters’ agenda (see DfES, 2005), which in turn was central to the Badman Report. The first was, as Sacks notes, the focus in the UK on the social contract notion of government rather than on covenant. This is seen primarily through the articulation of the report and the justification for the ECM agenda in terms of individual rights, which tend to reflect a concern with the notion of contract. The second is the shift from the family as the centre of the ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ to work, as the means by which an individual gains the financial resources necessary to enjoy their leisure time. Thus, we see the rise of ‘employability’ and the relationship between salary and educational attainment, rather than finding fulfilment in one’s vocation or ‘pursuing excellence’ in your work. Although we still share a common affirmation of ordinary life, there are subtle emphases in the way that such a good is understood, particularly in the relationship between the State and other members of the community.

Our vision of the good is central to our understanding of the well-being of our children and hence to the task of upbringing. A minority may pursue other conceptions of the good, but they do so against the backdrop of the ‘affirmation of ordinary life’. Further, pursuing well-being in our society in our time will necessarily require an engagement with this dominant conception of the good.

iv. Ordinary life as a foundation of the curriculum

So far, I have attempted to set out an account of education that is embedded in the morally rich task of upbringing. Education is concerned with the well-being of the child, and is product of a conscious activity of the educator. I have distinguished between two types of activity of the State, the first being the democratic agreement of central principles, and the second on the management of large-scale collective tasks. The first of these is in the subject of the first part of this fourth section of the paper. I have also drawn from Taylor a core account of the good that emerges from the enlightenment: ‘the affirmation of ordinary life’. Whilst accepting that this account still has a strong hold on modern conceptions of the good, I note two issues. The first is the way in which this conception is worked out
under a politics of social contract and social covenantalism. The second is the shifting emphasis from the priority of the family and vocation, to work.

Schooling is a State-managed means of providing elements of that required for the education of children, and further the school offers a public site within which the State may contribute to their wider upbringing needs. In principle, one can view schooling as consisting either of the essentials required for the well-being of children, or in providing that which is not readily available within the local community. In Davies (2003) I took the later view as a reasonable account of what actually happens in school, given that many of the subject areas covered are not essential to well-being, and subjects absent from schooling (for example learning to conduct role free intergenerational conversations) would seem important. In fact, there would seem to be much in the common expression that ‘the most important learning occurs outside school’. If the notion of ‘suitable’ and ‘efficient’ education is to have any real meaning then we need to build up from an account of the well-being of children whilst dealing with a reasonable level of pluralism about the good.

Taking Taylor’s account of the ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ as the tradition within which any account of well-being needs to be articulated, I will use MacIntyre (1985)7 to develop a framework for making sense of ordinary life and a basis for specifying what children need to develop in order to pursue a reasonable account of the good (see also Davies, 2003 for an extended account).

**Making sense of ordinary life**

Macintyre (1985) offers a framework for making human actions intelligible of three concepts; social practices, the unity of a human life and moral traditions. We pursue the good through a particular combination of social practices, different individuals pursuing similar ideas of the good potentially doing so through different combinations of social practices. The social practices available to us, and the ideas of the good that we are likely to pursue, being given to us by the tradition(s) with which we engage. As children, this is usually the tradition(s) of our family and neighbourhood. We are, as MacIntyre puts it, born into the middle of stories that we need to make our own.

‘As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity’ (MacIntyre, 1985:220)

In our case, ideas of the good are all tainted by this cultural shift towards an ‘affirmation of ordinary life’, whether we seek to pursue it or not (the soldier or the poet ideals might be pursued, but ‘ordinary life’ is explicitly sacrificed in their pursuit).

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7 There are obvious philosophical difficulties with combining Taylor and MacIntyre. In part Taylor has MacIntyre in his sights in ‘Sources of the Self’. However, these do not impact on the use here and time prevents a defence, I broadly think Taylor wrong on this point.
The basic building blocks of the child’s education are social practices, along with the skills necessary to think about and pursue a particular, appropriate, vision of the good. Macintyre defines a social practice as:

‘By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which the goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended’ (MacIntyre, 1985:187)

All co-operative human activities must take the form of social practices, given that co-operation requires mutual intelligibility. (Even a solitary activity such as course fishing is a social practice otherwise it would be impossible for anglers to understand each other.) We do not know in advance which social practices individual children will engage in to pursue their conception of the good. Given this, induction needs to occur into a range of social practices, as well as the education necessary to make reasonable choices between social practices, in the light of their emerging conception of what type of life is worth living.

In brief, social practices based education requires learners to:

- Develop the skills necessary to explore the traditions into which they have been born, and explore personal conceptions of the good.
- Basic competence in a range of social practices, leading to an ability to explore new social practices
- An ability to connect the social practices with the emerging conception of the good, and enable the conception of the good to inform the choices of social practices in which to engage.

Living ordinary life means living within and through social practices, and children are introduced to them from birth. The social practices of the family, shopping, storytelling and creation, cooking, etc. might be engaged with early in. Other social practices of ballet, football, history might follow on. Within these practices children learn the practice specific knowledge, skills and dispositions as well general skills such as writing and numeracy. Learning how to act well within these practices is the foundation of well-being and in childhood the social practices we engage with will reflect the lives of our families and local community. In politically active families, children begin to engage in political practices: canvassing for candidates in elections, seeking local counsellors support for developing play spaces, protesting around climate change, calling politicians to account through the British Youth Council or Funky dragon, etc. As they grow there is they can begin to be inducted into specialist practices – banking, or physics for example. What is more they are learning how to engage with social practices, and how to seek the help of others in learning how to pursue those practices well. The education of childhood and early adolescence will never be sufficient for children to be inducted into all social practices, but structured by ordinary life children are inducted into those practices most crucial for their well-being.
What is more they do this by actually engaging with the practice, not just by reading about it. As Aristotle reminds us, we understand, and see the point of, justice first by acting justly not by hearing about it. We learn how to act well in social practices by acting well, and then coming to understand it. The pedagogy begins with helping children to act well by displaying our own mastery in the practice itself, and where we lack mastery to seek out members of the broader family and community able to help. This is just an extension of what we already do. My daughter learns ballet by being supported by those with mastery, and given my own lack here, it is others in the community who support her induction into the practice (the local ballet teacher, older young people, the English National Ballet’s other ‘ballet buddies’, etc.). It is a practical activity, but as Darcy Bussell says to be able to dance ballet you need to understand the tradition, and so there is a contribution that rhythm challenged dad can contribute through stories of the ballets themselves.

Thus, a social practices based structure for EHE is grounded in ordinary life, in what is most significant to learn, in the naturalness of children’s engagement with the world. It is the use of the ordinary, but not in an unstructured way. The parents as educators, as the ones responsible for upbringing, seek to enable their children to act well in a range of social practices, and to understand what acting well entails. The central task of those who affirm ordinary life as a conception of the good is that responsibilities to the family and children in particular, are dominant; their well-being in partly constitutive of our well-being (and not visa versa).

**Conclusion**

The question of suitable education cannot be fudged, but suitable education needs to be seen in the context of the purpose of education itself. The affirmation of ordinary life as a conception of the good remains dominant in our tradition and society. As parents and adults, we see a clear moral responsibility for the upbringing of our children. In this paper I have sought to pull together some of these issues and articulate a plausible model for education which is suitable, one situated in ordinary life, one concerned with the induction into social practices. What this looks like will depend on families, and local communities; the practices in which they engage, that is the practices which are centrally constructive of their and their children’s well-being. It does not limit the child just to those practices, in fact in a longer paper I would argue much less so than schooling, for the child is consciously learning the skills necessary to learn how to be inducted into other social practices, ones beyond the parents’ ‘ordinary life’.

**References**


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