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THE LONG INTERVIEW

Schooling, Home Education and Childhood under Covid

Writer and home educator **Anna Dusseau** is interviewed by Richard House

Richard House [**RH**]: Anna, thank you for enabling this interview to happen. I have to confess to being a bit 'out of the loop' when it comes to the impact of Covid and lockdowns on children's learning and development – and I know you are at the forefront of it all, being a (former) teacher and now a home educator and writer with your own young family, and that you bring a thoughfulness and insight to these matters that few can match. Can you share with us something of your personal and professional journey to becoming a home educator and writer?

Anna Dusseau [**AD**]: Thanks so much for asking me to do this interview, Richard. Home education, I find, represents such a huge paradigm shift that it can be difficult to do justice to it in the style of a standard media interview. So I'm delighted to have the space to unravel the discussion here with you.

You are right, by the way. Becoming a 'homeschool' family was a personal journey for me, in a number of ways. I've mentioned in previous interviews that, as a child, I found school quite intolerable. Before I eventually learnt to settle and 'give in' to school, I used to battle (physically) against my parents, run away from the school gates, fake illness, and all sorts. Mostly, though, I guess I used to glaze over and the day passed by in a dream. This became obvious to my parents when, after four years in primary school, my reading level had dropped from several years above my age-group (when I began) to several years *below* my age-group (when applying for middle school). Something had gone very wrong, but home education was never considered as an option.

Many years later, my mother would tell me that she hated school, too, and so did her mother (my grandmother) and so on. And quite incredibly, my dad said the same. When you're a child, though, adults often feel that this sort of information will 'only make matters worse'. You can imagine, then, that when I became a mother myself, the 'school thing' was hardly something I was looking forward to. Although many parents joke that they 'can't wait to get rid of' their children when they turn 4, I don't really believe it. I think a lot of parents – perhaps especially mothers – suppress a deep sense of pain and 'letting go' when it comes to putting their child into the school system. We suppress those feelings, of course, because school is presented as such an unquestionable, immoveable fact. For me, I saw it as something like the end of childhood, but still I sent them. My children are nothing like me, so there were no tears, no drama. I thought, at least initially, 'Well, okay then. Here we go.'

What I forgot to mention is that, by the time my children began school, I had spent a decade working in education as a secondary school teacher, sixth-form manager, examiner and private tutor. I know, right? Why would a

school refusenik go on to become a teacher? Actually, an awful lot of teachers fit this exact profile – something I try to explain in my book *The Case for Home Schooling* (Dusseau, 2020) – but for now, let's just say that working in the school system hadn't made me any less sceptical. On a personal level, I quickly realised that I wasn't going to get anywhere professionally by being myself. I learnt to do what I have come to realise almost every teacher does, which is to put on a (metaphorical) mask, to sort of inhabit the role or 'performance' of being a teacher every day, in order to function in that kind of institution. Once I did this, I started getting noticed by LG (Leadership Group) and, ultimately, promoted to more senior roles.

Those years were pretty eye-opening, too. I had a lighter timetable as a manager, but when I *was* in the classroom, teaching, I would still find myself scanning the faces of those children, wondering how many of them were completely zoned-out and drifting through the day, as I used to. Quite a few, I guess. Because in the classroom, you have essentially three types of student: the volatile disruptors; the ones who are switched off; and the ones who jostle for a place by the teacher's desk because they *just want to learn and get out of there*.

The most enduring lesson from working in this environment is that – sadly – you *do* need very strict discipline simply to keep everyone safe and enable the group to make any progress. Too many school leaders now buy into a 'soft touch' approach to discipline; a mistake, because school is not a natural, healthy setting, and therefore you cannot expect children to behave in natural, healthy ways. It's sad but true: being tough keeps people safe in these places.

The school I sent my eldest child to was *not* tough and, looking back, this was how we began our journey into home education. A number of issues around bullying and safety came up in the year she spent in Reception (never involving my child, but I sort of 'logged it' in my mind); so that when, eventually, it was my child who became the victim, I went straight to the Head. I told her directly, as a fellow teaching professional, that she had a major bullying problem in her school due to weak leadership and half-hearted disciplinary procedures. This is a common problem in many schools – especially at primary level – and children frequently get moved from one school to another, in the hope that things will be better elsewhere.

Well, actually, that's exactly what my husband and I thought we would do. We knew home education was legal, so we decided not to rush it; we'd just withdraw our eldest two from the school and nursery school, then spend time making a better choice for a school which we hoped would take all three of our children through to secondary. But, within a fortnight, we had all fallen in love with homeschooling.

There is so much to unpack here, but the simplest way of looking at it is via the Internal/External Locus of Control. School children mostly have an External Locus of Control, because their lives (even outside of school hours) are micro-managed by adults all day, every day. In contrast, home education tends towards enabling the child to enjoy an *Internal* Locus of Control, which basically means being in charge of their own life, learning and decision-making. I was completely stunned, to begin with. I never knew education could be like this. I hadn't seen our family so relaxed and happy in years. I remember we sat the children down one day and asked them: 'Do you want us to find a school for September, or would you like to carry on learning at home?' They were all unanimous: 'Errr – home, *duh*!'

This was how I began writing – blogging at first, and then, quite wonderfully, putting together the book that was published last year as I write. I *had* to write; I felt compelled to. Everything I had learned at the Institute of Education, where I qualified, and everything I had assumed about education from subsequent years of classroom teaching, were being stripped away as, day by day, I watched my children teaching themselves to read and write, researching topics that interested them, asking

deep questions about politics and history that I didn't know children even cared about. It was as if a blindfold had come off, for all of us, and I was seeing what children are really capable of – *and what parents are capable of managing* – for the first time. I just couldn't keep it to myself. For a year, I woke up every day at 4 a.m. and wrote about what I was witnessing; the journey taking place. It would be easy to believe that my children, perhaps, are rather special, or that ours is a very particular journey, but in fact they are not; and our experience, as a family, is what you might call a 'textbook case'. It is what, in the world of home education, is simply called 'deschooling'.

RH: The importance of this conversation can't be exaggerated, Anna, not least because for some decades, some of our more enlightened educationalists and educators – Alan Block, John Holt, Ivan Illich, Mary Leue, Roland Meighan, Neil Postman (not to mention all the pioneers of humanistic education) – have been arguing that the institutional 'factory farming' schooling system is fundamentally flawed, is quite inappropriate for our children in the 21st century, and actually does untold damage to so many children at so many levels (as I write, the huge numbers of children currently coming forward to name sexual abuse between peers in schools is merely the latest example).

You speak of the 'huge paradigm shift' that homeschooling represents – and bravo to you for being at the heart of it! Some people have been hoping, even assuming, that the Covid crisis would generate / accelerate all manner of what would previously have been seen as *revolutionary* changes in modern culture; and the schooling system is one such institution which, some have argued, will never be the same again. I wonder from your experience as both home educator and former teacher, in your perception, to what extent do you think England's mainstream schooling system does have the potential to change in the kinds of ways we would like to see – and do you think Covid and the associated lockdowns have had any impact on this?

AD: These are key questions, I quite agree. I'm going to begin by going back and picking up on your point about the damaging environment of school, in particular the recent attention surrounding sexual abuse between peers. It's important, because issues like this actually lie at the very heart of the school problem.

In my book, I mention a story that has stuck with me from my early days working as an NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher). This boy in Year 7 – barely 11 years old – told a girl in his class that he was going to smash her teeth with a bottle and make her suck his penis. Charming, right? What was *surprising*, though, was how rapidly stories like this lost their shock factor for me and became the norm; no experienced teacher would flinch at this story. So, what's going on? Are these kids all evil? Raised by terrible parents? No, I don't think so. There are exceptions, of course; but most children come from families where respect is valued and this kind of behaviour wouldn't be tolerated. In fact, I met the mother of this boy who made the threat, and she was lovely; her son, too, was a different person around her. The reality is that forced schooling drives a wedge between parents and children.

From a very young age, children are separated from their parents and thrown into a setting where there are now 35 children and just one adult. Effectively, there's no adult guidance any more. How *can* there be, with a ratio like that? In this way, school becomes a lawless space, but the once reassuring gravity of home is undermined, too. Children often lose respect for their parents during the first few years of school, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps their parents dragged them to school crying every day and, eventually, something broke. Perhaps, to survive, the child clings to a peer group which drowns out any other figures in the child's life. Or perhaps the child has simply got the message that school is where you learn everything important, and parents are redundant relics of the past, useful for signing forms and washing your PE kit.

It's a shame, because the average parent has quite a bit of life experience, and of course is hugely invested in promoting the well-being of that child. By contrast, school offers no such support. A quite staggering proportion of NQTs quit teaching (like me) within five years of entering the classroom, meaning that the staffroom demographic typically comprises a blend of hardened 'battle-axes' and a flood of very young adults, often just out of university, with limited life experience or depth/diversity of knowledge to share. It's not a nurturing environment for anyone, and the rampant culture of school-based bullying, harassment and abuse is merely a symptom of the wider social dislocation that schooling breeds.

Coming back to your question, then: are schools capable of changing? I doubt it. It's true that the national lockdowns seem to have increased the number of home-educating families, but it is so far unclear how many have had a 'eureka' moment of realisation regarding the school system, and how many simply object to mandatory face masks. It's encouraging to see growing numbers of 'like-minded' families, but I don't know how this will play out over time. Whilst it is clear that many parents have woken up to the nonsense of the curriculum and are calling for change, I expect this will go nowhere.

Like Ivan Illich, I believe there is no meaningful tinkering to be done with the school system as it stands: the whole thing needs to be replaced with something else. There are many reasons for this, but I'll touch on just a few here. First, schools are already heading at breakneck speed in the wrong direction. Covid teaching has seen a return to 'chalk and talk' learning, with schools under pressure to cram content in order to recover students from the *intellectual paralysis of not being in the classroom* (add a scathing tone to my italics here, please). The number of teaching assistants, too, has been severely reduced due to poor funding, which is a tremendous loss.

But secondly – and more importantly – schools have various systemic problems which render them heavily stacked against change. Increasingly, headships are dominated by people who are essentially career-driven business sharks; the business just happens to be a school. Salaries in this world are huge, and the whole machine is driven by statistics and board meetings with wealthy and influential governors. These guys aren't likely to suggest there's anything up with the system: it works for them.

Teachers also tend to drag their feet around change. Mostly, this is because teaching is an exhausting, full-on, full-time role in which you barely have time to grab a sandwich for lunch, let alone pay serious attention to the new 'buzzword'. It is also significant, though, that teaching in the UK isn't a highly qualified job. If you have a basic degree, you can do it. So, you aren't dealing with a 'shoot for the stars' demographic here. Teaching is a job which, for many people, pays the bills. The alternative presentation – that teachers are deeply wise and compassionate/winged mythological beings – is a falsehood that perpetuates our societal investment in a knackered institution.

I'm conscious, of course, that questioning the value of teachers' work is never going to be popular. It might help my case to cite the number of teachers and school leadership figures who have publicly made the same points about the profession (not least, the great John Taylor Gatto), but I expect it wouldn't help soothe the sting *much*. Equally, I might draw attention to the fact that the incredibly rigid and sluggish school system isn't really the fault of teachers or even Heads, but rather, is due to the fact that schools are operated by the State, and hence the wheels of change are jammed both by the usual lethargic inefficiency of giant government institutions, and also by the ubiquitous flow of state ideology that shapes everything, from how history is taught to spreadsheet politics.

Again, though, I don't expect that to light any fires. Instead, I would ask any sceptics to turn their attention to the way in which democratic schools such as Sudbury Valley, Summerhill

and SML College in Brighton operate. In these settings, children manage their own learning, meaning that the staff who work there need to be *generally knowledgeable*, as well as engaged and present, in a way that simply isn't demanded of mainstream teaching. For example, rather than preparing a lesson for Year 9 (mostly recycled information that the teacher himself learnt at school and studied *ad nausea* as an undergraduate), a member of staff at a democratic school will enter the building in the morning with no idea what learning will take place that day.

Perhaps this teacher is an artist and, first thing, there are a group of students working on a mosaic. The skill at this moment is knowing whether you are needed or not. Maybe one of the teenagers *does* ask you a question, but it throws you. It's not about artistic form, or the history of art, but about geology: she wants to know what kind of stone these small, yellowish ones are. Can you help her out? Do you read and learn beyond your subject, or are you stuck on this one? If you don't have a ready answer, no matter. This is a good opportunity to demonstrate *how to learn*. Perhaps you could take the student and her friends to the library and see what books are useful, or else run an online search and explain how to locate decent journal articles on this topic. Perhaps it's quite fascinating, and for half an hour or so you are all deep in discussion; but then you're approached by a 7 year-old boy who can't make the mechanical arm on his Lego build move. And off we go again.

This, let's be clear, is a *real* test of skill and subtlety; a job in which you are constantly learning alongside the young people you work with, and all growing together. The prescriptive nature of curriculum-based learning is restrictive, sure, but it's also enormously underwhelming, both as a teacher and as a learner. Nothing happens in classrooms these days that couldn't be grasped within a five-minute Google search. The role of teachers, therefore, needs a rethink. Teaching the same information over and over for 40 years doesn't constitute a fountain of knowledge; it's a broken record.

What a lot of people don't seem to understand, either, is that a nationwide delivery of small-scale, democratic schools wouldn't kill the profession but, by decentralising, would actually create a larger infrastructure of jobs in education. If more schools like this existed, people like me would probably still choose home education; but the gulf of experience that currently exists between the liberation of home learning and the conveyor belt of conventional schooling would be significantly reduced.

RH: As always, your prescient insights could take me in so many directions, Anna! Re '…forced schooling drives a wedge between parents and children…. Children often lose respect for their parents during the first few years of school'. I wonder whether any research has ever been done on this issue? – the kind of research that the mainstream would find it hard to ignore. The kind of research question I'm thinking of is: 'What impact, if any, does the institution of schooling per se have on the psyche and *being* of children?'. (By the way, Alan Block has written a brilliant, heart-rending book on this very theme, in which he scathingly refers to schooling as 'the practice of social violence against children'; Block, 1991).

If there were even the slightest possibility that the institution of schooling itself were anti-learning and disruptive of healthy family life, then one hopes that responsible public bodies would wish to discover this and correct it. Unless, of course, 'the system' as is *does* 'deliver' the outcomes that the establishment wants – and from their viewpoint and interest, any negative unintended consequences can therefore be expediently ignored. I'm always intrigued by where the line comes between cock-up and conspiracy: that is, do key policy-makers and educationalists *know* that the current system is toxic; or are they professionally and self-interestedly so caught up in it and the prevailing 'regime of truth' that they're incapable of seeing its toxicities, and/or are in a state of denial about it?

Regarding teaching being just 'a job which, for many people, pays the bills'; I do wonder if there was a time (perhaps before the National Curriculum (NC) but post-Plowden / 1967) when teaching was indeed a true vocation, at least for some teachers. But the NC, along with the noxious Audit Culture (House, 2005, 2007) and its Ofsted enforcers, have knocked the stuffing out of any heart-centred idealism and vocationalism that might have previously existed.

What you say about the schooling environment not nurturing anyone is quite shocking; and you also refer to 'the rampant culture of school-based bullying, harassment and abuse [being] merely a symptom of the wider social dislocation that schooling breeds'. Phew. Do I understand this to mean that in your view, it's the ways in which *the institution itself* distorts and undermines family life and human relationships that then generates 'dysfunctional' behaviour within the system? If so, the implication is surely that the best 'anti-bullying policy' in the world will only ever be treating symptoms, and so will essentially be ignoring the generative causes of school-based bullying etc.

Picking up on your statement that 'the whole thing needs to be replaced with something else', can I audaciously ask you an impossible question, Anna: if you were Education Secretary and were given free reign by the prime minister to make whatever changes you deemed appropriate to the system, where would you start, and what would be your top priorities? Or put differently, what might a 'democratic school' to which you'd be happy to send your own children look like? From your previous answer, I guess a key aspect might be *setting teachers free* from an over-constraining curriculum and 'outcomes' focus, so they're able to respond spontaneously 'in the moment' with the group of children they're working with. And perhaps installing a framework of decentralised small-scale, democratic schools, too?

Finally, I note your comments about 'the usual lethargic inefficiency of giant government institutions', and 'the ubiquitous flow of state ideology': perhaps you might say that 'I wouldn't start from here – as schooling shouldn't be run in a top-down fashion by central government at all!'. Over to you!

AD: You know, I actually hadn't heard of Alan Block, but since you put this question to me, I have ordered his book. The subtitle you quote – 'school as the practice of social violence against children' – is haunting in the way that it cuts to the heart of the matter, reminiscent of John Holt's portrayal of the 'benevolent tyrant'. This, too, has stayed with me because of its devastating truthfulness. So let me clarify, in the context of this, what I mean by children 'losing respect for parents'.

Certainly, I am not suggesting that children somehow owe their parents respect or deference, but rather that the act of sending a child to school inevitably brings the dynamics of school into the home and makes the parent – knowingly or unknowingly – complicit in that process. Some families (like my own, as a child) can be torn apart by school refusal; parents – in fear and desperation – become physically and emotionally abusive, thinking of course that they are acting in the best interest of the child. More commonly, though, parents are simply drawn into the broader enforcement structure of schooling. Through parents' evenings, the signing of homework diaries, and so forth, parents find themselves acting on behalf of the institution, even in their private, domestic life with their child. We become secretaries of a system that we feel powerless to question; enforcers of an ideology of which we ourselves were a victim. Part of choosing to home educate, for me at least, has been accepting this painful reality; an interrogative, unravelling process diametrically opposed to the relentless forward trajectory of mainstream education.

When I wrote my first book, *The Case for Home Schooling*, a journalist asked me whether my children wouldn't rather be in school because, she claimed, her own son couldn't think of

anything worse than spending all day with her. This is an interesting point which, I think, clarifies what we're saying about the damage school does to families. It's incredibly difficult to send your child to school and continue to treat them as an individual with free will. It begins with the ideology that we sell them about school in the first place: that everyone goes to school, that it's what you *have* to do, that you must do as you're told. Next comes the 'daily grind' of the school routine which requires no shortage of pestering, bribing, and other forms of persuasion to get a small child on board, with getting up at the crack of dawn every day, bolting breakfast, dressing in an uncomfortable uniform, finishing off a homework task, and so on. All of these things, as we noted before, are administrative duties which parents perform on behalf of the school because, left to their own devices, I doubt that any 5 year-old would be standing at the door fully dressed and raring to go on a Monday morning.

So in this sense, I completely understand that journalist's point. I, too, became that person (the loving enforcer; the benevolent tyrant) when my children attended school and nursery, but – like so many home educators – I shed it, too, bit by bit, once we stepped out of that world. Now, I can't recall the last time I told my children to do anything; that's not my role and, in itself, this has relieved a huge burden on our relationship.

You queried whether the system of schooling in the UK actually 'deliver(s) the outcomes that the establishment wants' and also whether we are blinded by the 'prevailing regime of truth'. I can only give you my thoughts on this based on my own experience. With regard to the outcomes of schooling, I feel we must consider not only what the underlying social intentions of school might be, but also the bureaucratic sluggishness baked into the very architecture of schooling. After withdrawing my own children, I found myself stunned by the pedestrian ambitions of the classroom; ambitions which I fully bought into when we were doing it every day. Things I used to think were targets for children – like reading or memorising times tables – I discovered actually don't require teaching at all, because children just pick it up. How frustrating! What are we spending most of our childhood sat at a desk for, if the result is mediocre homogeneity?

Well, there are two ways of looking at it. First, it's true that the working world isn't a people economy at all; manual work and specialisms are increasingly performed by robots, wealth and influence are concentrated in the hands of a tiny percentage of individuals, and hence what's really required is an army of 'busy bees' to enter administrative roles in the service industry. But that's not the whole picture; it's not just a conspiracy from the top. In his book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari asks why humans chose agriculture when it made us work longer hours, under worse living conditions, for poorer nutrition. The answer, he says, is that we lost living memory of the past. It's not that we chose agriculture, but rather that – after several generations – we had nothing to compare it with. Similarly, the shape of schooling and the economy it feeds into are also blind processes which we've lost the ability to understand or interrogate.

Finally, you suggested that anti-bullying policies might only be 'treating symptoms', and asked where I would start if I were Education Secretary (*ha ha*!). Look, there's a lot to unpack here. Schools are a classic example of what Rutger Bregman (2021), in his book *Humankind*, calls 'total institutions' – rigid, hierarchical environments which systematically dehumanise people and pervert their natural behaviour towards others. Prisons, nursing homes and care homes are other examples of total institutions where, like schools, bullying is rife among both staff and 'inmates'. Bregman goes on to explain that, in humane prisons where all individuals are valued and not degraded by deliberate institutional humiliations such as plastic lunch-trays, uniforms and barred cells, the recidivism rate (the likelihood that the individual will go out and commit another crime) is significantly lower. What are we doing, then, by raising whole generations of children in the claustrophobic captivity of total institutions, where they sit on cheap plastic

chairs and spend their day being yelled at to line up or answer their name on a register? We're actively creating the dysfunctional society that school claims to be the solution for! I'm not the first person to make this observation, of course. Any approach to serious change, then, needs to be two-pronged: both decentralising education in order to shift towards a localised, democratic school model, and also greater investment in families (flexible working and financial support for home-educating parents) in order to allow more families to choose home schooling. I can't think of a better investment for the future.

RH: Phew; there's a lot there as always, Anna! You've articulated something I hadn't realised before – viz. that 'parents are simply drawn into the broader enforcement structure of schooling..., [finding] themselves acting on behalf of the institution.... We become *secretaries of a system that we feel powerless to question*.' (my italics) Perhaps another way of putting this is that with home schooling not even being considered as a feasible option by most families, the existing institution of school is just *a given* – an unquestioned axiom in society that few if any parents even question, and then into which they simply fit themselves and their family the best they can. Put that way, it does sound bleak. From your experience, can you say how many parents are aware of this dynamic, and that they are subject to a system that they and their children have absolutely no say in?

I'm also interested in this (beautifully expressed) notion of 'bureaucratic sluggishness baked into the very architecture of schooling' – and your statement that the problems with schooling are 'not just a conspiracy from the top'. This in turn got me thinking about Max Weber and his and others' critiques of bureaucracy – and whether there might be something *intrinsic* to the unavoidable bureaucratic imperatives of mass schooling that generates systemic toxicity, and what you term 'pedestrian ambitions' of/in the classroom. If there's anything in this, I guess the next question would be, given a schooling system that has been released from the bludgeoning clutches of centralised government control and the Audit Culture (we can but wish!...), is there any way in which a thorough-going humanistic, empowering learning milieu can be created for children within some kind of 'institutional' schooling structure? I guess that here, I'm asking you what 'a localised, democratic school model' (your term) might look like in practice.

I was also really struck when you wrote, 'It is incredibly difficult to send your child to school *and continue to treat them as an individual with free will*.... I can't recall the last time I told my children to do anything' (my italics). In my campaigning work I've been meeting more and more parents who have chosen to home educate because of their abhorrence at the direction in which state education is headed (and to emphasise again, this is a *systemic* criticism, *not* a criticism of our teachers desperately trying to retain a semblance of professional autonomy and dignity within that system). What I've found myself saying to home-educating parents is that before long, 'the only genuinely free-thinking young people will be those who have been home-educated'. Does this admittedly provocative claim have any resonances for you?

AD: You know, I really do think about these kinds of questions a lot, and yet I really *didn't* before starting home education with my own kids. I think that's a crucial point. Bertrand Russell once wrote that 'mass schooling [is] a scheme to artificially deliver national unity by eliminating human variation and by eliminating the forge that produces human variation: the family'. It seems obvious when you step back and consider it. In China, we recoil at this 're-education' of Uighurs – children literally taken from their families, just as British missionaries did to aboriginal children not so long ago, and made to sing the national anthem – but in fact, we should not be so shocked. The same principle is applied in schooling right here in the UK; and because we were not there a century ago, we have culturally forgotten that, at its inception, there was also a clear element of force.

Did I recognise all that when my eldest entered Reception class at our local school? Of course

not. These conversations are deliberately, strategically marginalised from mainstream discourse. Why, for example, is education so obsessed with so-called 'under-performing' groups, mostly from (economically) disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic minorities? This idea of constantly 'raising standards' and 'improving attainment' is an absolute lie: that's not how capitalism works. In a hierarchical pyramid economy like ours, what you need are millions of well-schooled, passive button-pushers at the bottom, in order to make money flow to the top. That's what schooling was *explicitly* about when it was introduced back in the nineteenth century, and that's still what it's *covertly* about today. No, it's not obvious to most parents, teachers and children caught up in the system, though. They are all fed a different story.

On that note, you mention distinguishing the damaging practices of schooling from the teachers themselves, saying that 'this is a systemic criticism, not a criticism of teachers'. On a personal level, I agree with that sentiment; we are all victims of an institution that was forced upon us, and it's asking a lot for anyone to stand back and think objectively. Teachers aren't (mostly) 'bad' people, it's true. But, as handmaidens of a despotic system, teachers do an awful lot of damage. I know, because I was one; and I was considered good enough to be promoted and head-hunted within the relatively short space of time that I worked in that environment.

The fundamental problem is that teachers are paid a salary for what they do. This is a point John Taylor Gatto – also a literature teacher, like me – raises in his book *Dumbing Us Down*, and which traces all the way back to Aristotle, who emphasised that as soon as a teacher is paid, they will act in their own economic interest, first and foremost. That's just human nature, and in this respect we are no different from Franz de Waal's capuchin monkeys, who were also little capitalists, taking care of their economic and material self-interest above all else. So anyway, you have this large demographic of people who are, quite obviously, fiercely defensive of a corrupt system because: a) they don't really understand it (I certainly didn't), and b) it pays the bills (money was my motivation for everything I did in teaching, and anyone who tells you otherwise is probably not being honest with themselves). If you read Adam Kay's memoirs of a junior doctor in his book *This Is Going to Hurt*, I estimated that he mentions the fact that he isn't paid enough on almost every other page. Teachers, doctors and everyone else – we are all just people getting by, and this affects our decision-making.

And so, what would a 'localised, democratic school model' look like in practice? It's hard for me to answer because, in my heart, I've come to believe that *any* form of 'school' is damaging to society. The only real reason I can see for the existence of schools at all is as childcare for parents who need to work; and yet this mode of working is itself the product of global capitalism, where people are funnelled into large, impersonal corporations that impose factory-style conditions on their employees (no matter what they're paying you). It was never the way of life for humans before, and it doesn't have to be now; we choose to buy into it because we lack the imagination to see another way.

If we are contemplating any form of school setting, then I can probably best respond with a few ideas about what it *wouldn't* be like. Peter Gray has observed that 'the biggest, most enduring lesson of school is that learning is work, to be avoided at all costs', and this must be our starting point. A school-based model would need to move from the stale routines and humiliation of what Rutger Bregman calls an 'absolute institution' towards a more personal, humanised space. In his book *Humankind*, for example, Bregman writes very persuasively about the positive effect in prison-system reform of swapping plastic trays for porcelain plates, and other environmental details which could be harnessed to improve the atmosphere of schooling. The nonsense of a curriculum must go too, of course. I call it 'The Whistle-Stop Tour of Everything', but really it is much more than that; national curricula are an instrument of nationalism itself, sewing seeds of

narrow mindedness and division. At a macro level, the only purpose of having a population awash with people who all have a very basic grasp of almost everything, from maths to metaphors, but remain – mostly – specialised in nothing, is to keep our noses to the ground, working in low-skilled, low-paid jobs and, importantly, spending our wages at every opportunity. This is what curricula produce. Allowing children to pursue their own interests and specialise in what they are good at would create something entirely different and, with it, a different kind of society. Hopefully a better one.

Finally, you asked me whether 'the only genuinely free-thinking young people will be those who have been home educated'. I'm going to explain why I think that's true. We all know that our genes are a basic unit of heredity, made up of DNA. The study of genes is called genetics, and the attempt to manipulate genetics is called 'eugenics'; this is what Hitler promoted in *Mein Kampf*, the justification for countless genocides, and the motivation behind laws in the US at the start of the twentieth century prohibiting inter-racial marriage. Importantly, though, all this toxic stuff is based on the mistaken (yet quintessentially *human*) notion of being right, of being smarter than nature, of being able to control evolution; and it always leads to deleterious results. Genes are strengthened by diversification, and this process is beyond the comprehension or control of an extremely short-lived species like ours. I mean, ask a shark; perhaps they might have a better idea after 450 million years.

Which brings me to memes. A meme, as defined by Richard Dawkins in *The Extended Phenotype*, describes a unit of cultural transmission. Memetics is the study of how memes behave, and like genetics, this is an organic, evolutionary process (albeit a much faster one, compared to the time it takes for something to work its way into the genome). The mistaken idea, which I have seen promoted by a few highly respected anthropologists, is that school is a vehicle through which centuries of cultural learning can be condensed, organised, and fed to children in a short time-frame, in order to 'catch them up' with where humankind is now.

In fact, as an evolutionary concept, this belief is as damaging as eugenics is to the healthy expression of genes. The problem lies in the idea of reverse engineering; that is, beginning with the end-product you have in your (limited, human) mind – an Aryan race, say, or a National Curriculum – and working backwards from this to engineer the 'desired' result. This is the opposite of evolution, the opposite of natural selection (a process which both genes and memes obey). Forcing cultural learning to take place in this way has the same crippling effect on human memetic evolution, as forced breeding practices have on human (and, of course, animal) genetic evolution. Just ask the next wheezing bulldog you see on your afternoon walk. Or King Charles II, for that matter.

Defining schooling, then, as the method by which cultural learning (memetics) passes from generation to generation makes about as much evolutionary sense as saying that eugenics is approved by the NHS for the creation of healthy families. Things are just bound to go wrong. In the same way that our human knowledge of genes doesn't begin to scratch the surface of nature's 'wisdom' cultivated through billions of years of trial and error, so our appreciation of what children today will need to know in the future is, by definition, an erroneous evolutionary concept. Evolutionary progress is not *designed*, like the wheels of a car; it is *designoid*, like the wings of a bird. The key difference between these two terms, Dawkins points out, is that designoid objects – such as the human eye – do appear to be very cleverly designed indeed, but in fact they are not because they happened by chance and, significantly, this level of complexity and perfection can *only ever* happen by chance.

The answer to your question, then, is 'yes' – the only free-thinking young people *will* be those who have been home educated, simply because the notion of free thought is not synonymous with the concept of teaching. Berkeley philosophy professor John Searle once remarked that 'the objective of converting the curriculum

into an instrument of social transformation… is the characteristic of the major totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century – leftist and rightist'. Searle was talking about universities here, but it can be applied to mass schooling, too. It is indeed very, *very* hard to think freely from within the school system, since the idea of a packaged, static body of knowledge to be 'learnt' is contradictory to the nature of the human animal, of all animals, and even of life itself. Education is a powerful tool, though, for short-lived autocratic regimes, from the Roman Empire to Stalinist Russia, and here's a good place to begin thinking about it: try searching on the web for a list of the nations in which home education is banned and see what comes up.

RH: I must share with you one of my favourite education quotations, Anna, as I think it speaks directly to your point about what you term 'forced cultural learning':

> Now there is a reversal; *the goals and outcomes are being stipulated at the outset*, and the procedures are being developed post hoc. The 'nature' of the child's experience is stipulated in advance, based on objective criteria, usually statistical analysis. *Because the outcome drives the procedure* (rather than vice versa), *there is no longer the theoretical possibility of unexpected results*; there is no longer the theoretical possibility *of becoming unique* in the process of becoming.… In this new system, evaluation of education policy reform is limited to an evaluation of the degree to which any given procedure yields the *predetermined* results…. (Fendler, 1998: 57, my italics)

I think this says it all – and for me brilliantly highlights the enormous damage done by a 'learning goals', credentials-centred framework of Audit Culture schooling, that can only ever reinforce the status quo rather than encourage the genuinely new thinking that humankind so desperately needs. The more I mix with home-educated families and children, the more I see these young people as our main hope for the future of humankind – and possibly even our *only* hope. I know that sounds grandiose, even apocalyptic – but it's where I find my own thinking increasingly headed these days.

Your statement (with which I entirely agree), that 'the idea of a packaged, static body of knowledge to be "learnt" is contradictory to the nature of the human animal, of all animals, and even of life itself', is the most stirring recommendation for *humanistic* learning and education that one could find anywhere. Brilliant and thank you! (and see the review essay on humanistic education in the next, Autumn issue – ed.).

I wonder if we could end with you saying something to parents with school-aged children who find themselves broadly agreeing with the points you've been making here, and yet who might be a bit daunted by the size of the step involved in abandoning institutional schooling for home education. And in the process, I'm wondering whether you have a sense yet of how your excellent recent book on home schooling has been received (Dusseau, 2020).

Thank you for this brilliant interview, Anna: I always learn things from you and your passion for children's learning, and I know our readers will too. Heart-felt thanks.

AD: Well, many thanks for asking me to do this, Richard. I have felt a pang of anxiety about doing interviews over the past year, as I tend to talk too freely and then find my words taken rather out of context. By contrast, what a pleasure to simply be bouncing ideas back and forth with you, in the excellent company of your readers!

That's a devastatingly good quote from Fendler, isn't it? You've sparked my interest to read the book, now, from which that quotation was drawn. The idea of looking back at the descent of education from generation to generation is something I find myself particularly drawn to when thinking about mainstream (especially media and political) responses to home education. 'But, you've been well-schooled' is what I want to say out loud, when reading a report about children 'missing education' or the 'dangers' of homeschooling. 'Of course,

you *would* say that.' A good friend of mine from London withdrew her children from the school system just after I did, and we have all – as couples and as families – been in a deep, unintentional process of deschooling over the past few years. I must say that it's painful as well as liberating, since it requires an often uncomfortable examination of your own experience of education: your childhood, your values, and what you're actually doing with your life. We both feel frustrated at times about the misrepresentation of home education and many people's dismissal of it, but we equally have long chats about the therapeutic challenge of accepting the profound cultural message of homeschooling. It can feel overwhelming and, without a doubt, the default position for many people is that they don't want to 'go there'.

Which brings me on to your question regarding parents who might feel 'daunted by the size of the step involved in abandoning institutional schooling for home education'. You know, a good way to think about it is to avoid engaging with the bigger picture and just deal with the moment. Is school working for your child, and your family? When we withdrew our daughter (and all our children) from schooling, the original plan was to spend a year homeschooling while we found a 'better school'. That goalpost quickly shifted, but I now expect that this 'moving picture' – these fluid boundaries – are simply the fundamental nature of home education, because they are the basis of real life. The antithesis of Fendler's point about 'the outcome driv[ing] the procedure', home education is all about being present, trusting the procedure, and engaging with life as it is right now.

To briefly illustrate my point, when we first left the school system, I felt as if there was a hole in our lives (social, structural, academic) that needed to be plugged; a feeling that was quickly replaced by the realisation that we are all happier now, and that the only reason we initially experienced leaving school as an absence was because it had already eroded so much of our lives. On the other hand, I know of so-called radical unschooling families whose children, in their teenage years, have opted for online curriculum learning and have sat public exams with everyone else; a choice these young people freely made for themselves.

A French philosopher once said: *Il faut s'accrocher au wagon*. I think about this a lot. Are we really better off if we just get in line behind the train and hang on to the wagon in front of us? Sometimes, I think perhaps we are. But at other times, I wonder whether this metaphor is reliant on the misguided belief that we must always be *going* somewhere. Maybe, rather, the trick of life is to let it happen to you, and learn how to respond to it, not the other way around. Let me try to clarify this point.

Most of us began school at age 4 or 5 and received our first homework task or spelling test within a year of starting public education. '*Well done*', they said, and they gave you a sticker to put next to your name. 'But watch out, because next year will be much harder!' And it was. And by the time you were 14 or 15 years of age, you found that schooling had become your life; that you thought almost constantly about grades and assignments, whether you were doing them or not. You sat exams and were given scores that seemed to define your worth. '*Well done*', they said again, '…but now you need to get ready for sixth-form college. This is the real test!' And so it goes on…. You might ask yourself, are you still on this wagon today, and is your child at the start of the tracks, slowly gathering speed on a lifelong journey of target-setting and, ultimately, disappointment? Home education has shown me that you can jump off this train at any time, and it feels… like landing.

Thank you for asking about my book, *The Case for Home Schooling*. What an incredible experience that was! I remember signing the contract to write it, with Hawthorn Press, and suddenly feeling like a fraud. I remember thinking, 'What on earth do *I* have to say about homeschooling?'. But, in fact, *that* became the point of the book. It's a book about crossing over, about taking that step out of the institution and into the messy wonder of real life. It's about reflecting on childhood, too, and (for me) my career as a schoolteacher. The kids I had taught came back to my mind so vividly while writing

this book; I felt as if I wanted to hug them all and apologise, to be real with them in a way I never could do when we were sat on opposite sides of the teaching desk.

It's a strange feeling to be approaching 40 with the knowledge that your career has been, to put it lightly, a total waste of time. It doesn't make you popular in the staffroom, either! Nobody wants to hear this stuff. People – quite naturally – want to feel that their lives and careers are purposeful and serve a higher good. My book questions that and, for some, it presses a nerve. It's a quiet book, though; not an international bestseller. What has touched me, though, are the emails. Not hundreds, by any stretch of the imagination, but just the occasional, unexpected message in my inbox from a total stranger, saying how the book affected them and helped them to form their decision around schooling. People like this are the reason I wrote the book; and knowing that my words have helped open another's mind to something mine was completely closed to goes a little way towards mending the damage I did in the classroom.

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About the interviewee

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