

How To Explain Autonomous Education to the Local Authority

Fiona Nicholson Sunday July 15th <http://edyourself.org/articles/autonomousedlocalauthority.pdf>

I'm writing this the morning after the autonomous home education conferenceⁱ and I'm sending it to Julie to distribute to the parents at my talk yesterday, because I came away feeling that we had focused mainly on the negative aspects of contact with **the authority** and what could go wrongⁱⁱⁱⁱ, and that a whole other area I was planning to talk about just didn't happen.

As I said yesterday, **the local authority** is not a monolith, but rather is made up of individuals who might or might not have a view on autonomous education, which is why I have made the annoying typographical decision to refer to **the authority** in Italics. If you are told it's OK by other home educators if your home education is very structured, with workbooks, but that anything else is going to be a problem with **the authority** this information will **not** be based on a great deal of evidence, since by and large **the authority** doesn't encounter many self-proclaimed autonomous home educating families.

I would argue that for the most part we simply don't have sufficient data to be able to generalise about **the authority's** attitude to autonomous education and that while you are poring over letters for clues about the attitude of **the authority**, it's worth bearing in mind that many authorities use standard or template letters and forms which can be sent out by administrative staff, and that anything you receive may have been originally put together by someone in a different department or someone who no longer works for **the authority**.

If you receive a form from **the authority** asking you to give details on how you teach or plan to teach particular subjects, it doesn't necessarily mean that **the authority** has a fixed view of what constitutes education. Any paperwork you receive will most likely be in the standard form which is sent out to all families and **the authority** won't know that the form is inapplicable to you – and to other autonomous families - unless you give feedback to that effect.

If you are unable or unwilling to complete the form, and don't return it and don't give any feedback, or if you tell **the authority** what you think they want to hear, then you may be setting yourself up for further problems. It is not going to be easy if you simply don't give **the authority** any information whatsoever about your home education, though the law is clear that the choice of how you present the information is up to you.

The Home Education Guidelines say: “**Some parents may welcome the opportunity to discuss the provision that they are making for the child's education during a home visit but parents are not legally required to give the local authority access to their home. They may choose to meet a local authority representative at a mutually convenient and neutral location instead, with or without the child being present, or choose not to meet at all. Where a parent elects not to allow access to their home or their child, this does not of itself constitute a ground for concern about the education provision being made.**

Where local authorities are not able to visit homes, they should, in the vast majority of cases, be able to discuss and evaluate the parents' educational provision by alternative means. If they choose not to meet, parents may be asked to provide evidence that they are providing a suitable education. If a local authority asks parents for information they are under no duty to comply although it would be sensible for them to do so. Parents might prefer, for example, to write a report, provide samples of work, have their educational provision endorsed by a third party (such as an independent home tutor) or provide evidence in some other appropriate form.”[3.6]^{iv}

We touched on how you could regard the actual form-filling as optional, in the same way as when a politician is asked a question and responds not by silence, but by saying **I'm glad you asked me that, that's a very interesting question**, and then goes on to put across the point that he/she wanted to make in the first place. While I'm reasonably happy with this analogy as far as it goes, on reflection I think it may sound as though I am advocating the family should be evasive, which was not my intention. Perhaps it might make more sense to think of a drop-down box with alternatives, where the final alternative is “*other”, followed with a box for you to say more, rather than as a compulsory multiple choice questionnaire which is missing the option **NONE OF THE ABOVE**.

Government Home Education Guidelines^v state that families do not have to supply a timetable, follow a curriculum, work for a "school day" or provide "school at home" type conditions. In addition, home educated young people are not required by law to study for formal qualifications although some families choose to do so. Educational philosophies are useful because they comply with the law as far as information about educational provision is concerned without impinging on any areas which the family may not wish to share with the authority (such as access to the child or samples of written work). An educational philosophy is sometimes called an "ed phil."^{vi}

At the outset, the authority should not be "judging" the parent's provision, but simply asking for some information. **The authority** does not require to be “satisfied” unless it appears that a child is **NOT** being educated.^{vii} In response to initial enquiries, I personally think it makes sense to structure your response along the lines of an Educational Philosophy and Report, and to write a short paragraph (ie no more than a few sentences) on each of the following: "**beliefs**"; "**resources**"; "**a few examples of belief in practice**".

I can't emphasise enough how important it is to understand that your response to initial enquiries from **the authority** is not about "proof" or "evidence". The **only** exception is where the authority makes it quite clear that it has reason to believe your children are not receiving education.^{viii} Simply having no information about home education is not in itself grounds for believing that the child is not receiving education, unless the parent has already been asked for information and has consistently refused.

We went into some considerable detail yesterday about “how much is enough” in terms of an Educational Philosophy + Report as a response to initial enquiries from **the authority**, which is partly why I wanted to give chapter and verse of the statutory guidance to show where I am coming from when essentially I say “give a little and see if it is enough” rather than setting yourself the impossible and overwhelming task of writing something which will sound incredibly impressive in order to negate every conceivable objection anyone might have at any point now or in the future to your mode of education.

Once again, I would like to stress that your response to initial enquiries should not be about providing evidence or proof. The authority may consider it does not have enough information, and the guidelines make it clear that **the authority** is permitted to ask for more from the parent. However, whilst **the authority** continues to ask for more, it will at some point have to decide whether it appears that a child is not being educated, since only at **this** point, should the authority send a formal notice under section 437, which could ultimately end in a School Attendance Order as we discussed yesterday.

As I said yesterday, I do believe that in some cases **the authority** would prefer to meet the family in person and/or to have some samples of the child's work, so to an extent anything you write ABOUT your home education may be rated less highly by **the authority** no matter how long or how academic or impressive your submission. But if you take into consideration **the authority's** preference for a face to face meeting or whatever, you should be able to tailor what you write so that the same boxes are ticked, in terms of painting a picture in words (or by literally sending pictures) of how your home education works in practice for your individual family, and if you should decide to go ahead with a face to face meeting, you have established the

framework and the ground rules for any discussion and you can refer back to what you have written if the conversation strays off topic.

When you provide information to **the authority** about your home education, I personally would recommend briefly stating your beliefs and values, in terms of what is important to you as a family, because it sets the context for the child's home education. It should be remembered that your response to initial enquiries from **the authority** is not about "proof" or "evidence". I personally would also recommend giving a few **examples of how your home education works in practice**. I have also observed over the years that some families find it useful to keep a record for themselves when they first start home educating, to remind themselves of all that they are doing, but I would stress again, as I said in answer to the question about blogging, that this does not have to be shared with **the authority**.

Efficient Education

The following extract is taken from my web page on Educational Philosophies.^{ix}

Home education is recognised as efficient if it achieves what it set out to achieve, hence it is important for parents to set out what they are trying to achieve. Moreover, it is accepted in law that parents may have diverse philosophical convictions when it comes to their children's education. [The Human Rights Act 1998 quotes Article 2 of the First Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights](#) declares that "the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions." There is [an important case in European Law, Campbell and Cosans](#), where "education in accordance with the parents' philosophical convictions" has been defined as convictions being "akin to the term "beliefs" (in the French text: "convictions") and denoting views that "attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance."

A google search for home education educational philosophies brings up the following:

<http://www.home-education.org.uk/resources-edphils.htm>

<http://free-range-education.org.uk/Educational%20Philosophies.html>

<http://edyourself.org/articles/edphilgeneral.php>

<http://www.education-otherwise.net/attachments/article/125/EducationalPhilosophies.pdf>

- i <http://www.lttl.org.uk/timings.html>
- ii <http://edyourself.org/articles/socialservices.php>
- iii <http://edyourself.org/articles/sao.php>
- iv <http://edyourself.org/articles/guidelines.php>
- v <http://edyourself.org/articles/guidelines.php>
- vi <http://edyourself.org/articles/edphilgeneral.php>
- vii <http://edyourself.org/articles/sao.php>
- viii <http://edyourself.org/articles/sao.php>
- ix <http://edyourself.org/articles/edphilgeneral.php#religphiloconvic>