

Statement Concerning Self-Directed Education in Austria

Peter Gray, 25 November, 2019

I am a research professor of psychology at Boston College, with specialty in children's development and education, who for many years has been studying Self-Directed Education in various settings. As part of my research I conducted a follow-up study of the graduates of the Sudbury Valley School, in Framingham, Massachusetts, which is a school designed for Self-Directed Education, and I also conducted a follow-up study of grown unschoolers—that is, of people who were homeschooled by a procedure in which they did not follow an imposed curriculum, but followed their own interests and learned in their own natural ways. Both of these studies revealed that young people in charge of their own education grow up well educated. They are able to go on to higher education if they choose, they get good jobs, and they live fulfilling adult lives. The results are summarized in the Chapter I have attached.

I have communicated with education officials in Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, where legalizing Self-Directed Education has been debated. I understand the difficulty from an administrative point of view. It is not possible to assess Self-Directed Education by traditional testing because the very essence of this approach is that children learn in their own ways, on their own schedules, and children with different interest learn different things. My work shows that we don't need to worry; they will become well educated as long as they are being raised in a healthy environment, where they have access to the tools, ideas, and ideals of the culture. Everyone learns to read, though at varying ages. Everyone learns to calculate with numbers. But more important, they develop a strong sense of personal responsibility that leads to success in life, and many of them develop passionate interests and abilities that lead to excellent careers. Here in the United States unschooling is not only well accepted but is growing rapidly. Currently, based on data from the US Department of Education, roughly 400,000 American school-aged children are being unschooled.

As I have said frequently, there are two crucial components to assessing any educational system: (1) Are the children happy? If they are not happy, then that system is obviously, right off, a failure. Any form of education that makes children unhappy cannot be good for children. You should ask that about your standard institutions for education, as well as about any approaches that are new to you. (2) Do they grow to become adults who are happy, moral, and productive in the sense of contributing to the larger society? If so, then they are obviously well educated, as that is the only legitimate goal of education.

So, if you are concerned about evaluation, I would suggest that in the short run you ask if they are happy and are being provided with the opportunities to educate themselves, and then couple that with a long-term research project in which you assess the degree to which they fit well and productively into Austrian society as adults.

I am attaching to this a copy of my chapter on Self-Directed Education that was published in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Educational Research, which summarizes some of the evidence for the success of Self-Directed Education. It is also available online here at <https://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.80>

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of this, don't hesitate to let me know. My email address is grayp@bc.edu.